

桜庭
一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOSICK

—ゴシック— 愚者を代弁せよ

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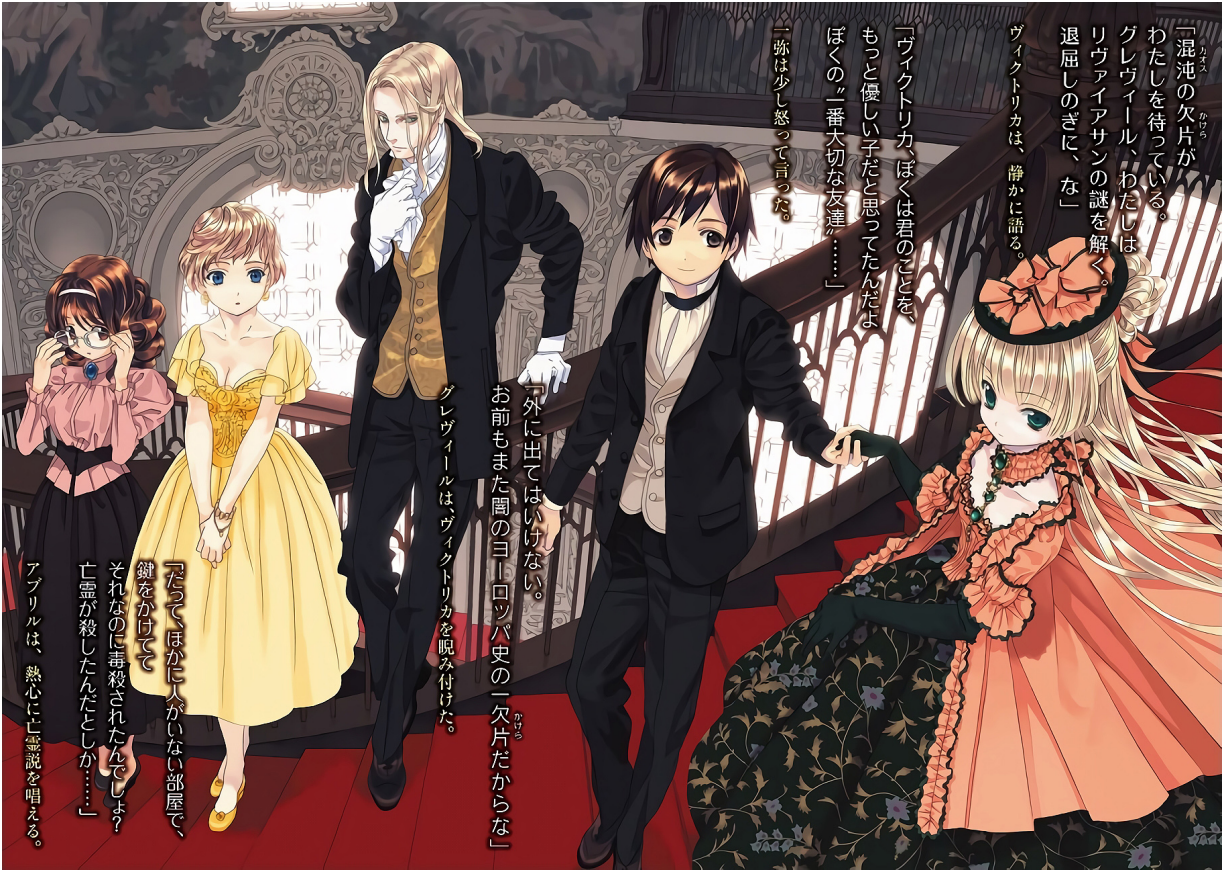
GOSICK

—ゴシック—愚者を代弁せよ

角川ビーンズ文庫







「混沌の欠片がわたしを待っている。グレヴィール、わたしはリヴァイアサンの謎を解く退屈しのぎに、な」

ヴィクトリカは、静かに語る。

「ヴィクトリカ、ぼくは君のことをもっと優しい子だと思ってたんだよ。ぼくの『一番大切な友達』……」

「弥は少し怒って言った。」

「外に出てはいけない。」

お前もまた闇のヨロツバサの「欠片だからな」

グレヴィールは、ヴィクトリカを睨み付けた。

「だってほかに人がいない部屋で、鍵をかけて」

それなのに毒殺されたんです？ 亡霊が殺したんだとしか……」

アブリルは、熱心に亡霊説を唱える。

——ポン！

その大きな金色の本は、
開いた途端にヴィクトリカの目の前に
不思議な情景を映しだした。
そこにはこう書かれていた。



〈いつの日かこの本を手取る者へ
一八九九年 リヴァイアサン 記す〉

ヴィクトリカ・ド・ブロワ

書物・甘いお菓子・ブリルを愛する、謎多き天才美少女。図書館最上階で膨大な書物を読むのが日課。

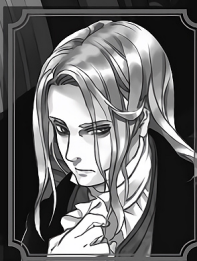
久城 一弥

極東の島国よりソヴェール王国に留学してきた、心優しい優等生。堅物で正義感に溢れた、重人一家の三男。

GOSICK

— ゴ シ ッ ク —

イラスト／武田日向



グレヴィール・ド・ブロワ

ヴィクトリカの異母兄で、地元警察署警部。色男だが、普段はなぜかドリルのような奇怪な髪型をしている。



アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談好きの美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



セシル先生

一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童顔の女性。

CHARACTERS

コルデリア・ギャロ

……ヴィクトリカの実母。

ブライアン・ロスコー

……謎の人物で奇術師。

ウォン・カーイ

……ロスコーの知人、奇術師。

リヴァイアサン

……かつてソヴェールに君臨した錬金術師。

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“I’ve stolen a garden. It isn’t mine. It isn’t anybody’s. Nobody wants it, nobody cares for it, nobody ever goes into it. Perhaps everything is dead in it already.”

—*Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden*

Prologue: The Illusion of the Black Tower

A monochrome world, black and white as day and night.

Atop a hill on the outskirts of the village, a black tower stood in the darkness of night, illuminated by the faint, pale light of the hazy moon.

The black tower's pointed roof seemed to pierce the night sky. A huge round clock on the tower indicated the time with its two jet-black, sickle-shaped hands.

There was not a soul around.

It was a silent, ominous night.

A black carriage came up the hill, disturbing the darkness. The horses neighed as thunder rumbled in the night sky.

The carriage stopped, and a woman in black disembarked. She tried to say something, but the driver paid no attention and wheeled the carriage back down the hill.

The woman stood alone, bewildered. After another thunderous roar, cold rain pelted down on her like arrows, and she took off.

To the black tower.

Two square windows, like eyes, gazed coldly at the woman. White flashes inside made it seem like a monster blinking.

The woman let herself get sucked into the black tower.

The interior was like a manufacturing plant straight out of a nightmare.

A dark room cloaked in gray, it had the same round shape as the tower itself.

It was hollow above, the ceiling shrouded in pitch-black darkness. Looking up was like staring into a bottomless abyss. It was hard to tell which way was up or down.

Like a sword cutting through darkness, something was slowly moving from right to left. The air shook. A huge pendulum was swinging back and forth, whistling ominously.

In the corner of the room, four huge mechanisms made odd grating noises. Gears turned endlessly.

The woman in black slowly entered the room and looked around in horror.

She removed her black veil, revealing a young face. She had hair and eyes of an indiscernible color. Underneath her thick cloak was a pure-white dress.

She surveyed the room fearfully, frowned at the clock and pendulum. When she spotted the ebony table, she rushed toward it.

The table was littered with books and laboratory equipment. Just as the woman picked them up and began searching for something, a puff of white smoke rose in the middle of the room.

The woman failed to notice it. The smoke took on a human shape.

When she finally turned around, she saw a monster standing there, wearing an eerie mask and a robe.

The woman screamed. Her lips moved to form words.

Forgive me, Master of the Black Clocktower!

I desperately need your help.

My father is sick and dying.

The masked man stepped closer.

The woman's frail figure trembled with fear.

Slowly, the man raised one gloved hand, grabbed his mask, and spoke.

O' fair maiden!

Lay your eyes upon my curse.

Behold the wretched face of an immortal man!

The man's mask slowly peeled away and fell from his hands to the dark floor, swallowed by the shadow of the giant pendulum.

The woman's beautiful face contorted in shock and horror.

This is the truth of immortality!

The woman's eyes widened. She brought her snow-white palm to her face and groaned. The man's hand moved to her throat. She started choking.

The woman staggered and fell on the floor. Her bare shoulders quivered. The man stood there, shrouded by the shadow of the pendulum, looking down at her.

The shadow shifted, and white light shone on the man.

The woman cried out in horror.

What horrible secret your mask hides!

Chapter 1: Memoirs of an Alchemist

In a dark room, villagers in their chairs watched with bated breath at the black-and-white images projected on the screen.

The monster in the black tower was about to take off its mask and reveal its terrifying face.

The music swelled.

People had gathered today in the village's small movie theater—a small abandoned theater that the young villagers renovated—to watch a horror movie titled 'The Illusion of the Black Tower'. Among the villagers dressed in their cotton outfits was a girl in stylish clothing and her companion, an oriental boy. They were students of St. Marguerite Academy, a school for children of aristocrats located on the outskirts of the village.

The girl, slender with short blond hair, had been glued to the screen for some time. The boy, on the other hand, had been sitting with his back straight like a warrior for nearly an hour, his eyes tightly closed... sleeping quietly.

When the woman's words appeared on the screen, the villagers stirred.

“What horrible secret your mask hides!”

The blonde girl—Avril Bradley—swallowed.

With a loud sound effect, the monster's face finally appeared on the screen.

Avril screamed and threw the brown box she was holding. Chocolate chip cookies flew toward the ceiling. Avril strangled the sleeping Kazuya.

“A skeletoooooon!!!”



Kazuya jumped awake. The people behind yelled at them to sit down. Some commented about the falling cookies. Kazuya bowed deeply, apologized, picked up the cookies, and sat back down again. He glanced at Avril.

She was staring at the screen with her mouth open and eyes twinkling. Kazuya stared at her childish face for a while, then smiled, fixed his posture, and softly closed his eyes.

The year was 1924.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small nation in Europe.

Lush green mountains, lakes, and vast forests marked its border with Switzerland. An endless expanse of vineyards sprawled on its border with France. A beautiful summer resort facing the Mediterranean Sea separated it from Italy. Surrounded by powers, this small kingdom survived the last Great War and was called the little giant of Western Europe because of its long and grand history, power, and its influence on the great nations.

If the Gulf of Lyon was the grand entrance to the kingdom, the Alps were the secret attic hidden in the deepest part of the country. At the foot of the mountains lay a small village, a beautiful and peaceful place known for its wine and fruits. On the outskirts of the village was a mysterious school that had stood since the Middle Ages.

St. Marguerite Academy.

Known as *the* educational institution for the children of aristocracy, it held many a mysteries. Some believed that secrets of the small, mysterious, and powerful kingdom were hidden in this school. After the end of the war, the secretive academy began accepting gifted students from allied countries as international students.

Kazuya Kujou was an international student from one of these allied countries, an island nation in the Orient. He had been selected for his excellent grades and good conduct. Excited about his new life, he crossed the sea to this kingdom, leaving his family and some part of him behind.

Kazuya's life as an exchange student was filled with the prejudices of the nobility, the peculiar horror stories that pervaded the academy, language and cultural barriers, his meeting with a strange and beautiful girl, Victorique de Blois, and their adventures together.

“That was a loud scream,” Avril said gleefully as she opened the theater’s swinging door. “You’re such a scaredy-cat, Kujou.”

“I didn’t scream because of the skeleton,” Kazuya denied.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“I’m telling the truth. I was asleep the whole time.”

“Or you were so scared that you couldn’t keep your eyes open. I know you. Besides, if you were asleep, you couldn’t have screamed at that moment, could you?”

“Well, you were choking me.”

“Kujou.” Avril turned around with a serious face.

“What is it?”

“No excuses,” she said.

“What?!”

“Even if you’re a scaredy, pathetic wimp who fails at exams, I will still be your friend.”

Kazuya gave up trying to say anything.

Sure, I’m a little pathetic at times, but I’m definitely not a scaredy-cat, and I get the highest scores in class.

Paying no attention to Kazuya’s brooding, Avril walked out of the movie theater with a spring in her steps.

The busy street was bathed in the light of the early-summer sun. A passing shower had drenched the street, but the skies had cleared up now, and the wooden signboards and the trees lining the street sparkled from the droplets. Triangular roofs, the bright green vines hanging from the windows, and the blooming geranium flowers were dazzling under the sun.

It was a Sunday afternoon.

The two-month-long summer break was just a few days away. With exams over, the days seemed to pass by slowly. Kazuya and Avril were hanging out in the village, not in their uniforms, but casual attire.

Kazuya was wearing a cotton shirt and a leather vest, while Avril had a simple white muslin blouse and a pretty polka-dotted, flared skirt. She walked energetically, swinging her arms around.

“Hmm?” Avril suddenly stopped in her tracks, looking thoughtful.

Kazuya stopped as well. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just, I think I’ve heard that story somewhere before. A masked monster lurking in a black tower, and a woman dying inside.”

Kazuya just nodded, seemingly uninterested. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you did. You read every horror story there is.”

“I suppose.” Avril mulled it over for a bit, then resumed walking. “Hold on a second.” She stopped in front of the post office and went inside.

Kazuya waited patiently for her.

Two tall men came strolling in his direction. One of them had flaming red hair peeking from under his hat, while the other was an oriental man, like Kazuya, with handsome features and a cold look in his eyes.

Girls walking past them looked back at the unfamiliar men, wondering who they were. Noticing their gaze, the men stopped and winked at the girls, who walked away, blushing.

Kazuya watched the men go.

“I’m back!” Avril popped out of the post office, holding a parcel. “I did some mail order shopping. You can send money to some of the bigger stores in Saubreme, and they will deliver the goods you want by mail.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.” Kazuya was impressed.

As they started walking again, Avril said, “I swear I’ve heard of it before.”

“Heard what? Oh, you mean the movie’s plot.”

“I’m serious.”

Avril was unusually quiet as they ambled along the road back to the academy.

Houses became fewer now, replaced by sprawling vineyards on both sides. Grape vines glittered under the summer sun. A wagon slowly rolled past.

The main gate of the school came into sight. When they reached the iron fence, worked in gold and intricate scroll-leaf design, Avril suddenly exclaimed, “Ah!”

“Wh-What is it?”

“I remember now! Over here, Kujou!”

Avril grabbed Kazuya’s hand and pulled him away, through the main gate and into the school grounds.

The campus, modeled after a French-style garden, was more crowded than usual on weekends. Summer vacation was just around the corner, and students were lounging on the benches, gazebos, and the lawn, or laughing

as they strolled along the pathwalks. The crystal fountain, wet from the shower earlier, glistened.

“What are you talking about?” Kazuya asked as they ran across the gardens.

“The black tower from the story! I remember where I heard it from!”

Avril stopped. Her blue eyes twinkled like she was really enjoying herself.

Kazuya hesitated for a moment before asking, “Heard where?”

“Here!” Avril exclaimed. “Right here at St. Marguerite Academy. I knew I’d seen that clock tower design somewhere. Look. There it is!” She pointed to the sky.

Kazuya followed her finger and saw a large, old clock tower looming up ahead.

The tower was dark gray, its roof of a pointy, complex shape. Far above, a huge round clock with jet-black hands showed the time.

Kazuya studied the pointed roof. It looked very similar to the black tower in the horror movie. It was too much of a coincidence.

Kazuya and Avril exchanged glances.

“What does this mean?” Kazuya wondered. “Why does our school have the same tower as the one in the movie?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s some kind of a curse.”

“A curse? Why do you always have to link everything to the occult? Hey, wait. Where are you going?”

Avril approached the clock tower, and Kazuya quickly followed after. Avril slipped through the eerie, dead breech branches that surrounded the tower and stood in front of the door.

Kazuya stopped. A wind blew, sending the dead branches scraping against the stone walls like a sinister whisper. The old, rotting wooden door was covered in layers of cobwebs. He looked up and saw two small windows staring down at them like the eyes of a monster.

“Avril...?”

Avril pulled on the doorknob, but it was locked. Her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

“Looks like we can’t get in,” Kazuya said, relieved.

“Yeah...”

“Well, I have to go to the library, so...”

As soon as she heard the word ‘library,’ Avril abruptly raised her head and grabbed Kazuya’s hand. “Wait, don’t go. A-All you have to do is this!”

“What?”

“U-Uh... this!”

Avril swung her long and slender leg. Her polka-dot flared skirt billowed, and her silky-smooth leg went up in the air for a moment.

She then kicked the door. It fell silent, as though stunned, then slowly creaked open.

Avril frowned in pain and hopped around, moaning. She then forced on a smile. “It’s open!”

“More like broken!”

“S-Same thing. Let’s go check it out!”

Avril pulled on Kazuya’s arm. Despite his protests, Kazuya stepped inside the clock tower.

The inside was darkly-lit and wrapped in dreary silence.

There was a long corridor, followed by a long, narrow staircase. Dust rose as they walked.

Coughing profusely, Avril grabbed Kazuya’s arm. “Weird. I’m getting dizzy.”

“Yeah, me too.”

As they wandered the tower, Kazuya also began to feel a strange discomfort, as though someone was shaking his head.

Avril climbed up the stairs first. A few steps and she tripped and fell on top of Kazuya, screaming, sending them both rolling down the stairs.

Coughing, they rose back to their feet.

“Let’s head back,” Kazuya said. “I gotta go to the library.”

“No!”

“...Why not?”

Avril turned around. “Uhm... I think the room in the last scene of that movie is in this tower.”

Kazuya slept through most of the movie, but he remembered the scene she was referring to when he opened his eyes after being strangled by Avril. An eerie room with huge clockworks and a metal pendulum that made a

grating noise. It was the room that the masked monster lurking in the Black Tower used as a laboratory for his bizarre experiments.

“I doubt it,” Kazuya said.

Ignoring him, Avril proceeded onward. Both of them were pressing their forefingers to their temples. Their heads hurt for some reason.

Avril eventually found a door. Not paying heed to Kazuya’s protests, she kicked the door open.

She hopped around in pain. “There it is!” Her face lit up.

Kazuya peered into the room too.

It was an eerie gray room, similar to the one in the horror movie *The Illusion of the Black Tower*, slowly shifting as if it were some creature forgotten in time.

A dim, vast space.

It was hollow all the way above to the dark, high ceiling. The pendulum of the giant clock swung idly from side to side, cutting through the dusty air.

Four huge clockworks whirled, intertwining with the cogs. They made low, bizarre sounds. It was as if they had entered a hellish manufacturing plant. It was both suffocating and horrifying.

Kazuya clenched his fists. Once he had calmed down a little, he surveyed the room.

There was a large ebony table where a variety of laboratory equipment of different sizes lay scattered, like someone had just been here moments ago, except they were all covered in dust and wrapped in the same gray hue that enveloped the entire room.

Kazuya studied one wall. Only a large stained glass window, depicting a flower garden—one red flower blooming amid purple and yellow ones—gave off vivid colors in the otherwise gray workshop.

A dark and sinister room of pendulum and clockworks.

Kazuya swallowed and looked around.

The room was eerily similar to the movie they had just seen.

What does this mean, he wondered. He looked to his side.

Avril was deep in thought. “Maybe...”

“...Maybe what?”

“I told you the film’s story sounded familiar, right? I remember now. It’s very similar to one of the stories about this school.”

“What kind of story?”

“First of all, this is a historical fact. Around twenty or thirty years ago, there was a very famous magician, or alchemist, or whatever you want to call him, in Sauville. He wore a mask, a robe, and thick gloves. The queen took a great liking to him, to the point that he eventually became involved in politics.”

“I see.” Kazuya nodded with great interest.

Avril’s face lit up. “The alchemist built a workshop in the academy’s clock tower, holed himself up there, and continued using his terrifying power. Soon, no one could oppose him, but he also gained a lot of political enemies.”

“I didn’t know that. So this used to be his workshop?”

“Probably. And this is where the story begins. One day, the king, fearing the alchemist’s power, dispatched the Royal Knights to this academy to assassinate him. But despite being riddled with poisoned arrows, the alchemist just wouldn’t die. And then he disappeared. The knights searched frantically, but they couldn’t find him. Rumors said that he was immortal. That’s why he hid his never-aging body behind a mask and robe.”

“I see...”

“Ever since then, it’s said that a monster lurks in the clock tower, prowling... Kyaaaaah!”

“Can you please keep it down?” Kazuya said with a straight face.

“Anyway, I think the explanation is simple.”

Avril pouted. “What do you mean?”

“If it’s based on a true story, it would explain why this clock tower looks so much like the one in the movie.”

“Wha—”

“To summarize, there used to be a weirdo living in this clock tower, giving birth to the story that a monster lurks inside. The movie was made by someone who knew the story. That’s why the design of the building, the workshop, and the story are very similar. Now, let’s get out of here.”

“Hmm...” Avril scowled. “That’s just boring.”

“Yes, the truth is often boring.”

“Tsk. You’re such a jerk.”

“What? Wh-Why?”

“...You just are!” Avril looked away.

“Okay. Anyway, I gotta go to the library, so...” Sighing, Kazuya was about to leave the workshop when he heard a strange noise behind him and turned around.

Avril was opening the package she got from the post office—a mail order from a store in Saubreme—right here and now.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I thought I’d ask about the monster in this tower.”

“Ask who?”

“This thing right here!” With a smug look, Avril showed Kazuya what was in the package.

It was a square wooden board with the letters of the alphabet marked on its surface. It came with a heart-shaped black stone.

Kazuya studied it for a while. “What is it?”

“It’s called a Ouija board. It’s used with a planchette. Wanna try it?”

“What’s a planchette?”

“It’s a tool to talk to spirits. You place the stone here and touch it with your index finger. Then you ask a question.”

“What? That sounds dumb. I’m leaving.”

“Wait.” Avril quickly stopped him. “Please stay for a bit. At least two people are required for this.”

“I really gotta go, though.” Kazuya hesitated for a moment, before giving up and sitting down next to Avril. He did as she said, placing his index finger on the stone.

Avril stroked her chest in relief, then closed her eyes. “O’ spirit, if you’re here, I have a question,” she muttered.

Kazuya snickered, and Avril pinched his cheek.

“O’ spirit, did an alchemist live here?” Avril opened her eyes.

The black stone moved slowly, to the letters O, U, and I—meaning yes.

Kazuya frowned. “Pfft. You’re moving it yourself.”

“Quiet!”

“...Sorry.”

Avril closed her eyes again. “O’ spirit, is the alchemist here right now?”

“Of course not. Let’s just go already. I gotta go to the library.”

“Shh!”

“Sorry... Man, there’s you, Victorique, and Ms. Cecile. I’ve done nothing but apologize to women. I think I’ve said a lifetime’s worth of

apology since coming to Sauville. That's it. I will never again apologize for the rest of my life."

"I said be quiet."

"Sorry..." Kazuya looked at the Ouija board.

Avril's fingers were shaking. Surprised, he glanced at her face. She was looking pale, and there were beads of sweat on her forehead.

"What's wrong?" Kazuya asked.

"Kujou... It's not me that's moving the stone..." Avril slowly pulled her hand away.

The stone was at the letter U now. Confused, Kazuya removed his finger too. Then the stone moved, despite no one touching it, and abruptly stopped at the letter I.

"OUI. That's a yes. The alchemist's soul is still in this tower." When Avril realized that they had both removed their fingers, she let out a yelp. "Oh, no! The manual says we can't stop halfway, or something evil will show up. What do we do?!"

The Ouija board slid across the floor, as if someone was dragging it. It moved about two meters, before slowly coming to a stop.

They looked at each other. There was a faint noise from somewhere. The floor creaked as though someone invisible was passing right in front of them.

The door opened silently. Avril shrieked and clung to Kazuya.

A set of footsteps faded, and another set was coming closer. Soft, surreptitious footsteps, climbing up the stairs, in front of the workshop, and then stepped through the open door.

Avril screamed again.

The person who entered shrieked in response and jumped.

It was a petite woman wearing a simple beige dress. She had shoulder-length, fluffy brown hair and large round glasses. She jumped, quite literally, then removed her glasses, and put them back on again.

Her big, droopy brown eyes widened. "Oh, it's just you two."

It was Ms. Cecile.

Kazuya and Avril relaxed. They stared at the teacher for a while with their mouths hanging open.

Ms. Cecile looked unusually stern. “What on earth are you two doing here? This place is off-limits to students. I saw signs of someone kicking down the door, so I came in. Now, tell me the truth. Which one of you did it? Kujou? Or Avril?”

Avril awkwardly cast her eyes down, and Kazuya shifted uncomfortably. “Whoever did it is grounded for a month,” Ms. Cecile said with amusement.

Avril looked dejected, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. When Kazuya noticed her expression, he thought about his options.

“Close your eyes,” Ms. Cecile said, and they did as told. “Raise your hand if you did it.”

Neither of them moved. After a while, Kazuya raised his hand reluctantly, a glum look on his face, but with back straight regardless.

Avril also raised her hand, slowly, not to admit that she did it, but to point at Kazuya, putting the blame on him.

Ms. Cecile chuckled. “You can put your hands back down and open your eyes. Avril, next time make sure you open the door with your hands, not your feet. And Kujou...” She shooed them out. “Let’s see... I think you have trouble with women. I’m getting a little worried.”

As soon as they stepped outside, Kazuya and Avril breathed sighs of relief. The dizziness they felt while inside also vanished. They took several deep breaths.

“Don’t ever come near this place again. Do you understand?” Ms. Cecile warned. “Just because there’s only three days left until summer break doesn’t mean you can just let loose. I will change the lock by the end of the day. Anyway, stay away from the tower. Got it?” she repeated. She looked more serious than usual.

“Why?” Kazuya asked.

Ms. Cecile just shook her head over and over. “You just can’t come here. Ever.”

The sky around the tower was dark and cloudy, as though a thick gray sheet had been plastered above it. Insects chirped in the garden.

Ms. Cecile hastened away, leaving Kazuya and Avril in the corner of a verdant green lawn a short distance away from the tower.

“Did you sense something off with her?” Avril said, looking thoughtful. “Maybe there’s something about the clock tower. What do you think, Kujou?”

There was no reply. She looked around and spotted Kazuya already far in the distance.

She scowled. “Argh, I let him get away! I thought for sure I could stop him from going to the library today.” She let out a sigh and started walking.

The wind blew. A drop of water fell from a leaf onto Avril’s nape, trickling down her neck.

“Darn it,” she mumbled. “This was supposed to be a date. I mean, I invited him to the movies, so it could only mean a date. I was so looking forward to it, got dressed in my cutest outfit, but he was sleeping soundly next to me!” She scowled. “I know you’ve never failed any exams.”

She heaved a deep sigh and looked up. Small white birds streaked across the clear, blue sky. The fountain, the flowers in the flower beds, and everything else was glistening.

Avril sat down on a bench along the path and massaged her feet. “Kujou, you jerk!” she huffed.

A strong gust tousled Avril’s hair. She closed her eyes, then slowly opened it. There was confusion and fear in them.

She looked back at the clock tower. Two small square windows, like the eyes of some monster, were looking at her. She sensed a gaze, as if someone was watching her. She studied the tower once more with a frown.

“Oh, right. We stopped halfway with the Ouija board. If I recall correctly, the manual said that if we did that, an evil spirit would haunt you.” Her blue eyes widened. “That won’t happen, right?”

The wind blew.

Shadows fell on the gray clock tower, painting it even darker, and blacker.

Meanwhile...

St. Marguerite’s Grand Library.

The tall tower hidden behind the academy’s vast campus stood in silence, as it had for the past three hundred years.

Despite being one of Europe’s most prestigious halls of knowledge, not many knew of its existence because of the academy’s secretive nature. The

stone tower, faded from exposure to the elements, had a small leather door, but not a lot of people used it.

Inside, the ceiling was staggeringly high, hollow all the way up, with gigantic bookcases on every wall. Tens of thousands of thick, leather-bound books filled the shelves. Intellect and silence—that was all there was in this place.

A maze of narrow wooden stairs led all the way to the beautiful ceiling covered with solemn religious paintings.

Something long and golden, like the tail of some strange creature, was hanging down, swaying occasionally then stopping, as though to lure those underneath it.

There were all sorts of stories about this library. It was said that the building was built in the early 17th century by the then King of Sauville, a henpecked husband, and that at the top of the maze of stairs, so complex that no one could make it to the top, was a small, luxurious bedroom that he had built for his lover. According to some, a small golden fairy lived at the topmost floor.

The owner of the golden tail, the origin of the fairy rumor, showed no interest in the pre-summer vacation fever of the world outside. Neither the blinding summer sun nor the passing shower surprised her. And just as always, today she was engrossed in reading in the library's secret conservatory.

Between the garden, with its dense tropical foliage and garish red flowers, and the staircase landing, was a small, beautiful girl, lying on the floor.

Victorique de Blois.

Born to Marquis de Blois, a powerful nobleman in the Kingdom of Sauville, and Cordelia, a dancer of mysterious lineage, she was confined in the academy for reasons unknown. She was looking extravagant again today, wearing a pink ruffled dress with a floral design, and dainty laced shoes. She was smoking a pipe idly.

She had surprisingly handsome features, and at first glance, she looked more like a porcelain doll that had been painstakingly crafted by an artisan. She had a small nose and glossy, cherry lips. Her cheeks were the color of roses. But her pale emerald-green eyes gave her a peculiar, ruthless aura that was neither adult nor childlike.

Her long golden hair that reached her feet hung over the railing, swaying like the tail of some strange creature.

In her small hand was a ceramic pipe that she would occasionally bring to her mouth to puff on. A white wisp of smoke rose from the pipe up to the skylight.

Thick books lay open around her—esoteric academic books, books on sorcery, dictionaries, all of which seemed to take a long time to read. Victorique was reading them all at the same time. She turned the pages, ran her eyes over them, and then turned them again.

She was absorbed in her reading for a while, until eventually she raised her head and groaned.

“I’m bored...”

She flailed her legs like a child throwing a tantrum, sending books flying all over the place.

Victorique placed her pipe on the shoe-shaped pipe stand and lay down. Curling up into a little ball of frills, she began rolling from side to side, pushing the books even farther away.

“I’m so bored! What do I do? I’m going to die! Once the boredom rises to my throat, I will choke to death. It’s medically possible. Ah...”

She rolled from right, left, forward, and backward across the floor for a while. Suddenly, she bolted up. She stretched her small hand over the railing and stared blankly far below, at the entrance to the library.

There were no signs of life except for Victorique in this vast hall of knowledge. Normally, the leather swinging doors would flung open right about now, and an odd oriental boy would be running up the stairs screaming, “Victorique!”

“He’s late today,” Victorique murmured.

Sighing, she leaned against the railing for a while. Her golden hair hung down, swaying from side to side.

“Maybe I’ll just jump off. I’ll die, of course, but for a brief moment, it’ll feel exhilarating. Ow!”

Victorique let go of the handrail and held the back of her head with both hands. Tears slowly formed in her quiet, emerald eyes.

“Th-That hurt...”

She turned around slowly. A book was on the floor. The vibrations from her flailing had caused a book to fall from a nearby shelf, and it struck her

head. It had a golden-colored cover and was oddly ostentatious. After glaring at it for a while, she moved closer, warily. Like some wild animal prowling around a trap, she leaned forward, sniffed, and backed away. She repeated this a few times.

After about ten minutes, Victorique finally let her guard down. She picked up the book, placed it on her lap, then slowly opened it.

Pop!

The moment she opened the large book, a strange sight appeared before her.

Four huge clockworks.

An equally huge pendulum.

A large man wearing a robe and a mask, and a boy lying beside him.

The boy's stomach was ripped open, golden drops of water trickling out, as if a golden flower had bloomed fully from within him.

Somehow Victorique could sense that the man was laughing behind his mask. He was feeling triumphant.

But in his heart was anger and sorrow that he had held for years.

Slowly the man turned around and saw a huge girl wrapped in ruffles looking down at his miniature garden of a world. Staring into the girl's huge, green eyes, he pointed to the ground, trying to say something.

Victorique snapped back to her senses. She stared at the book on her lap. It was large, with three-dimensional images of a pendulum, clockworks, a masked man, and a boy sprawled on the ground—a so-called pop-book that were often created for children. This was, however, no child's plaything, but a storybook so elaborate that, for a moment, it seemed as if the scene itself was real.

Victorique looked at where the masked man was pointing. On the page was a passage handwritten in French. It looked like it was written by a child.

Victorique frowned. "What is this?" She moved her face closer.

To whom have acquired this book.

Written by Leviathan, 1899.

Victorique's brows furrowed. She stared at the masked man. "Leviathan?" The weird alchemist who supposedly lived here in the academy...? So is this your memoir?" She snorted. "Do you really think I'm going to read this? I'm afraid not."

Victorique closed the book and returned it to its place. She sat still for a while, smoking on her pipe.

“Aaaaaah! I’m so bored!”

She curled up into a ball, rolled around, and sprang back up. Frowning, she grabbed the golden book and spread it open on her lap.

“Fine. I hate this, but I’ll try reading it. Between reading and dying of boredom, the former is the obvious choice.”

After practically insulting the author, she buried her face into the book and started reading.

“Hmm. So *it is* a memoir. Must’ve had a lot of time on his hands to create something this elaborate.”

I, Leviathan, am an alchemist.

With my occultic powers, I have succeeded in creating something out of nothing.

You, who have acquired this book in the future, must be surprised.

My power will keep me alive forever, and I will punish those who try to expose my secret.

Are you flummoxed?

Victorique frowned. “What an oddball. I can’t stand this guy.”

She sighed, but before she could close the book, the next words caught her attention.

You, from the future.

Are you a man?

A woman?

An adult?

A child?

It does not matter.

For my mystery will never be solved. Are you infuriated?

Victorique’s brow knitted. She was angry. Her golden hair swelled and her rosy cheeks turned red with rage.

“P-Preposterous! There is no mystery I can’t solve. What an insolent wretch!”

She flipped to the next page, but the entry was marked by a different date and looked more scrawled than written.

You, from the future.

I am a fool.

Speak for me and reveal my inane secret!

“What is this man talking about? First he says no one can solve his mystery, and now he asks me to reveal it. What a confusing fellow.”

Victorique closed the book. “I’ve had enough of this.”

She tossed the book down on the floor. She then reached into the candy jar that was once a turban, peeled off the wrapper of a macaroon and chewed it happily, wearing a thoughtful look.

Munch, munch...

After finishing the macaroon, she took another one.

Munch, munch...

Her gaze was fixed on one thing—the book she threw on the floor.

The wind coming in from the skylight rustled the macaroon wrappers scattered on the floor. Victorique curled up again, rolling from side to side, thinking, and eventually rose with a sigh.

“I can’t beat boredom,” she mumbled. “It wouldn’t be my greatest foe otherwise.” She picked up the golden book again.

Each page featured a different scene. Glittering palace halls, a young queen with a shiny crown, people gathered in a solemn courtroom, a young man with long blonde hair, kneeling. Victorique became more and more engrossed in her reading that she had forgotten to put her pipe in her mouth.

After a while, a familiar sound came from the hall far below. The door slammed open, followed by the sound of footsteps running in.

“Victorique!” called a familiar voice.

Victorique twitched. But she didn’t respond, and instead continued reading.

Far down below, a small boy appeared. His footsteps echoed as he ran up the stairs, panting along the way.

“The scoundrel’s finally here,” Victorique muttered without lifting her head.

Smoking her pipe, Victorique kept on reading. The rhythmical footsteps of the boy, Kazuya Kujou, reverberated in the quiet garden.

But the stairs were long.

It would take a few more minutes before he would appear.

“Victorique!”

It was about ten minutes later when a breathless Kazuya arrived at the conservatory, panting, partly due to the heat. Wiping off his sweat, he sat

down next to Victorique in a familiar manner.

“Are... you bored?” he asked, gasping for air.

Victorique lifted her head up wearily. Kazuya gave a jerk.

A tiny face framed by bright golden hair. Green eyes holding a mysterious sparkle that he had never seen before.

Victorique was silent for a while. Kazuya waited with bated breath.

“Not really,” she said finally.

Kazuya sighed.

“Why do you ask?” Victorique said, smoking her pipe idly.

“Nothing. I learned something interesting, and I thought you’d be happy to hear it. You know, if you’re bored.”

“That so,” she said curtly.

Kazuya felt a little discouraged, but quickly lifted his spirits back up.

“I’m gonna tell you anyway. I don’t know if you’re aware, but there used to be a mysterious alchemist in this academy.”

“A bizarre coincidence,” Victorique replied.

“Hmm? Coincidence?”

“I have actually just accepted the alchemist’s challenge.”

“You what?!”

A breeze blew through the skylight, stirring the flowers and leaves in the garden. It was hot outside in the summer sun, but here it was pleasantly cool, as though completely unaffected by the heat from the world outside.

Victorique, smoking her pipe languidly, was reading a book spread open on her lap.

Kazuya waited quietly for a while, but when he realized that Victorique had no intention of answering his question, he asked, “What do you mean by a challenge?”

Victorique ignored him. The wisp of smoke rising from the pipe quivered each time she shifted. While waiting, Kazuya took some of her macaroons and tossed them into his mouth, and organized the books scattered all over the floor.

“Kujou, did someone invite you to the movies?”

“Yup! Wait, how’d you know?”

“There’s a movie ticket stub peeking out of your pocket,” Victorique said in an impassive tone. “I can see the title a bit, and it doesn’t seem to be

your cup of tea. I could therefore surmise that someone invited you.”

“Wow... You hit the nail on the head. There’s a new movie theater in the village, so we went there. And it turned out that the movie was based on the story of a mysterious alchemist who lived in this academy.”

“Ahuh...”

Victorique immediately lost interest in the topic and continued reading. Kazuya was doing his usual tidying, picking up the macaroon wrappers and putting all the scattered books in one place, while talking about the movie theater and what he had seen in the village. Victorique was puffing on her pipe without uttering a single reply, but after a while, she suddenly raised her head.

“Do you know what a Meissen porcelain is?” she asked.

“I do,” Kazuya replied, baffled. “It’s German tableware, right? It’s white and smooth and pretty. Why the sudden question?”

“I thought I’d tell you about alchemy.”

“Will it take long?”

“Of course.” Victorique nodded. “Very long. As long as a never-ending dream. Long as the life of a dragon. Come here and listen.”

Kazuya made a sour face, but reluctantly sat back down beside her.

“Kujou,” Victorique said, a cold expression on her face, “I don’t know how much you know about alchemy, but I would guess that you are mostly ignorant.”

“Yup, I know nothing about it. Sue me.”

“Allow me to explain, then. Alchemists are people who study the art of rewriting information in matter and transforming it into another substance. The techniques vary, but historically, there are three main things that people have sought from them. These are gold, immortality, and homunculi. These were believed to be created with the help of a special substance known as the Philosopher’s Stone, so powerful alchemists were thought to possess one. According to one theory, the stone had a rich red color like pomegranate. Kujou, if you fall asleep, we’re done.”

“I’m not sleeping! I just closed my eyes.”

Victorique snorted. “Alchemy is generally misunderstood as a demonic field that has been passed down from ancient times, but its history is actually brief, surprisingly enough. And I mean *really* brief. Did you know that?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“Now a young man makes his entrance. Germany, the beginning of the 17th century. His name was Johannes V. Andreae, the son of a pastor, and a blockhead. He wandered about during the day and attended religious circles at night. It was in that circle that Johannes met a young, unusual man who called himself Christoph. He was an enigmatic, unemployed dimwit who knew nine languages, including ancient Hebrew, and knew all sorts of useless trivia.”

“Speaking of useless trivia, I’m pretty sure you know just as much, if not more. Ow! Why’d you kick me?!”

“Anyway, the two idiots hit it off, which ultimately led to the advent of the long alchemy boom. They holed themselves up in their room and crafted a grand imaginary tale about a fictional character, despite their parents and brothers telling them to get a job or find a wife. In other words, they had a peculiar way of passing time. The hero of their story was Christian Rosenkreutz, a diabolical man born in the 14th century. The two idiots gave the fictional man various abilities and made him the leader of a group of alchemists called the Order of the Rose Cross. They came up with the Order’s enigmatic pavilion, their strict code, and their history, which they compiled into a book of fantasy literature titled *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. Not content with that, they wrote two more books, the *Fama* and *Confessio*. In short, they had a lot of free time on their hands. But the three books they wrote in just a few years became bestsellers in Europe during the Middle Ages, and imitation books and people claiming to be members of the Order of the Rose Cross appeared. In just a short time, the imaginary tale that these two blockheads crafted was edited by society, and eventually became a reality in the course of subsequent history. Perhaps at a rate that even the two men could not stop.”

“I see...”

“They were a perfect match. Christoph was a fountain of all kinds of mystical knowledge from ancient times to the Middle Ages. But he himself could not do anything with his vast knowledge. That’s where Johannes came in. He browsed through Christoph’s vast knowledge, gathered only the interesting parts, and edited them. The talents of these two men brought the Order of the Rose Cross into life. Various books were published about the Order, creating a post-medieval frenzy.”

Victorique set the book down and chewed on a macaroon.

“So about the Meissen porcelain,” she continued.

“Change of subjects already, huh?”

“Not at all.” Victorique tossed the macaroon wrapper aside. Kazuya picked it up and put it in his pocket. “Now we go to 18th century Germany, where there was a young blockhead named Friedrich Bottger.”

“Another blockhead?”

“Yes. The history of alchemy is, in essence, the history of these blockheads. Friedrich was an apprentice apothecary, but he went around telling everyone that he was a great alchemist and that he had a Philosopher’s Stone. One night, the Polish king’s army kidnapped Friedrich. There was something the king really wanted.”

“Money?”

“No. There are these beautiful porcelain plates in your country, no? I believe it’s called *Imari*¹.”

Kazuya nodded. “Yup. They’re white, smooth, and pretty. What about it?”

“The King of Poland was very fond of the porcelain plates he received from the Orient. At the time, *Imari* ware were precious items, valued at the same price as gold. The king wished to create exactly the same thing using alchemy. Friedrich, imprisoned in the royal workshop, was at a loss. He wanted to go home so badly, but he couldn’t. The king had believed his lies and pestered him day and night to use his Philosopher’s Stone. If he confessed, he would be executed. Friedrich drowned himself in alcohol while kneading and baking clay, and after ten years, he finally produced beautiful, white, smooth porcelain, similar to the *Imari* ware. Delighted, the king built a factory for mass production. That’s how the Meissen porcelain came to be.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Kazuya remarked. “So what happened to this Friedrich guy?”

“He died of stress and heavy drinking. A portrait of him is on display in the Meissen Porcelain Museum, with a pale face, gulping down a cup of wine. What I’m trying to say is…”

Victorique seemed irritated for some odd reason. Her cheeks were flushed. Kazuya studied her face curiously.

“Alchemists say enigmatic things to bewilder others, but the fact is that alchemy’s history is fraught with fraud. What I have just told you is only a small part of that history. Some men went too far with their lies, and some wrote fantasy literature to pass the time. Over the course of centuries, the people who wanted to believe their lies, and time itself, turned their fantasy into reality.” Victorique snorted. “In other words, the alchemist Leviathan, who lived in St. Marguerite Academy, was just one of those frauds. Needless to say, he did not create something out of nothing. He was just skilled at deceiving people. They’re eternal pranksters, so to speak. Unruly children who won’t come down from the tree even when their mother is angry.”

“But apparently that alchemist became quite famous and ended up meddling in Sauville’s politics.”

“Utter nonsense. Had I lived in the same period as Leviathan, I would have exposed his trickery. With my Wellspring of Wisdom, I would have picked up the scattered pieces of chaos from behind his mask, reconstructed them, and choked the life out of him in no time at all!” Victorique’s face was red. “I will speak for the fool and reveal his secrets!” she declared, her face filled with rage.

Kazuya regarded her small face. “Hmm...?”

A breeze blew through the skylight, tousling Victorique’s long hair. A wisp of smoke billowed to the ceiling from the pipe sitting on the shoe-shaped pipe rest. Birds chirped in the distance.

“Sounds like you’re having a lot of fun,” Kazuya said.

“Fun? Me?”

“Yeah. Because for once you’re not bored, thanks to that alchemist.”

Victorique’s cheeks puffed, and she fell silent. Kazuya watched her with a smile.

White smoke continued rising toward the skylight. Birds chirped once more.

The dazzling sunlight spilling through the skylight announced to the conservatory that it was already summer outside.

The next day.

It was a hot Monday morning, two days before the long summer break.

As usual, Kazuya woke up at exactly 7:00 a.m. without an alarm clock and got out of his bed with bleary eyes. He washed his face in the bathroom, brushed his teeth, put on his uniform and tie, and left the room with his bag, containing textbooks and notebooks that he had already put inside last night.

When he went down to the dining hall, it was still empty. The children of nobility were not morning people; they all slept until the very last minute. Kazuya greeted the sexy, red-haired dorm mother, who served him breakfast.

“By the way, Kujou,” the dorm mother said, pouring him another cup of tea. There was a cigarette in her mouth. “You went to the movie theater yesterday, didn’t you?”

“I did. Wait, you too?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not me, but my friend. She said she saw an oriental man at the movie theater. The only oriental guy around here is you.”

“Oh... Yeah, I guess.”

“She said you were with a red-haired hunk. How do you know him? The girls in the village are dying to know who he is.”

“A red-haired hunk?” Kazuya wore a puzzled look.

I was with Avril yesterday.

After thinking about it for a while, he realized that the oriental man the dorm mother was referring to was not him, but the pair of guys he had seen on the way back to the academy. One of them was an oriental man with a sharp look in his eyes and the other had fiery red hair peeking out from his hat.

“That wasn’t me,” Kazuya said. “I was with my classmate the whole time.”

“Is that so? Apparently they winked at my friend, and she got all fidgety.”

“You should’ve realized that it wasn’t me when she mentioned the winking part. There’s no way I could do that!”

“Really? Wanna give it a try, then?”

The dorm mother winked at Kazuya, and he blushed.

Kazuya finished his breakfast and left the dormitory. Straightening his posture, he walked straight toward the school building.

As he walked along his usual path, his gaze went to the old clock tower that he had never paid attention to before.

Hmm?

The gray stone tower was dark and shadowed, as though it was still nighttime. The door that Avril had kicked down yesterday was dangling open.

Ms. Cecile said she'd have the door fixed right away.

Feeling somewhat responsible, Kazuya turned down the path and trotted toward the clock tower. A closer look at the door revealed that it had been fitted with a new lock, but there were traces of it being pried open.

Kazuya peered into the tower. He saw the exact same thing as yesterday. A dark and dusty corridor and a staircase leading to the darkness at the end.

Warily, he stepped inside. "Is anyone there?" There was no answer.

I better tell Ms. Cecile about the broken door.

As he turned back, he heard a faint squeak, the sound of a door opening inside. Kazuya whirled back around. "Is someone there?" he asked, a little louder this time.

Still no answer.

After some hesitation, he stepped into the tower.

As he walked down the corridor, he felt dizzy as he did yesterday. It was difficult to explain. He felt stifled, like space itself was distorted, as if his head was being squeezed. Kazuya went up the stairs and stumbled over the same spot where Avril had tripped. Perplexed, he continued up the stairs and found the second door that Avril had kicked in yesterday, the mysterious door to the workshop with the giant clockworks and pendulum.

The door was open. He could hear the springs squeaking.

Slowly Kazuya stepped inside and peered into the workshop.

A man was lying on the floor.

Kazuya rushed to the man and helped him up. They had the same skin color—it was the oriental man that he saw yesterday. When he sensed Kazuya, the man slowly opened his eyes, almond-shaped and bearing the same jet-black color as Kazuya's.

He extended a trembling hand toward Kazuya. His eyes were wide open, and the whites of his eyes were bloodshot, the veins looking as if they would pop. His pupils were dilated, and a faint moan escaped his lips.

Kazuya noticed a strange smudge on the man's forefinger, a purple-colored bruise the size of a coin. Shaking, the man clung to Kazuya and whispered in his ear. His voice was ominously raspy, as though coming from the depths of hell.

"The alchemist...!" he groaned.

"What?"

"Leviathan!" the man screeched. Then his head dropped.

Kazuya shook the man repeatedly, but he wouldn't respond. He was dead. Kazuya left the man there and dashed out of the room. As he stepped out into the corridor, his eyes caught a flicker of motion, a black shadow zipping past outside the small window.

Kazuya scrambled down the stairs. "Wait..." He turned around. Slowly, he returned to the small window.

"A shadow? That can't be right." He glanced back at the stairs, flummoxed. "This is the second floor. There's no way someone could pass by outside the window."

The wind whistled outside, followed by a rattling.

Kazuya recalled Avril's frightened expression and trembling voice.

"We can't stop halfway, or something evil will show up."

Behind him, gears squeaked as they turned.

The police arrived about thirty minutes after receiving the report. Kazuya, who found the body, Ms. Cecile, who had received the news from Kazuya, and several senior teachers were gathered at the scene.

An unfamiliar, attractive young man strolled across the dewy path toward them. He had long golden hair hanging down his back, and the chiseled features of a noble. His green eyes held a hint of distress, and he was dressed fashionably in a pure-white shirt blouse and riding pants.

The handsome man immediately approached the discoverer, Kazuya. "Good morning, Kujou."

"Good morning...? Wait, do I know you?"

The man regarded Kazuya uncomfortably. He then gathered his long, silky blonde hair with both hands and pulled it forward into the shape of a cannon.

"It's me," he said.

"Whaaat?! The inspector?!"

Ms. Cecile's mouth dropped open as she stared blankly at Inspector Blois. Kazuya watched the inspector for a while, unable to speak.

The inspector let go of his hair, letting it slide back down behind him, framing his scowling, yet stunning face golden.

"Did you change your hairstyle?" Kazuya asked. "You look decent."

"I didn't," Inspector Blois huffed. "It's so early, I didn't have time to fix it."

"I-I see..."

The inspector began fidgeting, his silky hair swaying from side to side. He smelled good.

"It's so silky," Kazuya remarked in an uneasy tone.

"Mind your business. So, where's the crime scene?"



“Inside, in a room with clockworks. Smells like flowers.”

“It’s shampoo! Stop making fun of me. Let’s go.”

Designating Kazuya as his assistant, the inspector entered the clock tower, walked down the corridor and up the stairs. He was momentarily surprised by the huge clockworks and pendulum in the workshop. Upon seeing the corpse, he knelt down, and began studying it.

“An oriental man,” the inspector said. “Is he related to you?”

“No! Sure he’s an oriental, but he’s probably from a different country. His face is a little different.”

“Hmm?” Inspector Blois continued observing the body. “If I recall, a couple of strangers came to the village yesterday, and one of them was an oriental man. Must be this guy.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Through the grapevine. Gossips among young girls, in particular, are a valuable source of information for us. I also know that you went to the village yesterday. Apparently a couple of young students caused a ruckus at the movie theater.”

“I-I wouldn’t call it a ruckus...”

The inspector lifted his head. “I heard you were with a pretty girl with short blond hair. Is that her?” He pointed behind Kazuya.

Kazuya looked over his shoulder and saw Avril standing there in her school uniform, rubbing her blue eyes blearily.

“Avril!”

“K-Kujou! I heard something happened at the clock tower!” Avril ran up to Kazuya, then looked at Inspector Blois. She stared at the man for a bit, then frowned a little.

“...What?”

“Who’s this guy?”

“Inspector Blois. He’s from the police.”

Avril continued observing Inspector Blois, then brought his mouth closer to Kazuya’s ear.

“Wh-What is it?” Kazuya asked.

“He’s very handsome, but there’s something off about him.”

“I can hear you!” Inspector Blois barked.

When they left the clock tower, Inspector Blois' men had just arrived, looking sleepy and still in their nightclothes. As usual, they were holding hands. There was a man with them, wearing a hat that hid his fiery red hair. It was the deceased's companion.

"We found him at the inn in the village," one reported.

"He was sleeping soundly!" the other added.

The red-haired man's face was obscured by his hat. He was tall and slender, and he carried himself nimbly, walking down the pebble-strewn path with a spryness that made him seem as if he were dancing on a cloud.

He had chiseled features reminiscent of ancient sculpture, and he looked sinister with his dark-green upturned eyes and thin lips twisted in a sneer.

"Why did you come to the village?" Inspector Blois asked.

"Wong, my companion, seemed to have his own reasons, but I had no idea what it was," the man replied.

"Where were you this morning?"

"I was at the inn the whole time. I'm sure the innkeeper can vouch for me. For the record, it's physically impossible for me to have killed Wong. Unless, of course, I was at the inn and the clock tower at the same time."

"Why did you come to the village?"

The man's lips quirked up, and his cat-like eyes narrowed. His entire body seemed to emit some sort of invisible energy.

"I came looking for a monster," he said in a low voice.

The man started laughing. Kazuya and Inspector Blois exchanged glances.

Kazuya felt a poke from behind. He looked over his shoulder and saw Avril looking worried.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I was thinking... with this incident and all... that maybe it had something to do with what we did yesterday."

"What did we do again?"

Avril turned pale. "The planchette!"

"Oh, *that*..."

"What if this happened because of that?"

"N-No way. That's just superstition. Don't worry about it. There must be another reason for this. A living person killed him, not a curse or something evil. Ah, right! Sorry, Avril. I'll see you later."

Kazuya hurried away from the tower.

The morning sun was shining on the garden. The crystal fountain sparkled, and bright-green foliage rustled in the breeze.

Avril stood in front of the fountain, brooding over the planchette for a while, until she realized something.

“Oh, no!” She frowned. “He must have gone to the library again!”

St. Marguerite Academy’s Grand Library.

A vast tower frozen in time, filled with nothing but dust, mold, and the smell of intellect. Huge bookshelves occupied the walls, and a maze of narrow wooden staircases ran through the middle of them.

On the top floor of this silent sanctuary, Victorique de Blois was lost in thought, with only books and a ceramic pipe keeping her company.

Her small, fragile body was covered with layers of lace and ruffles. Today she was wearing a white and pink organdy dress with shiny pearl buttons. Her cheeks were puffed out.

“I hate this,” she mumbled. At her feet lay the golden book she was reading yesterday. “I hate this memoir!”

Frowning, Victorique curled up into a white and pink ball and started rolling to the staircase landing.

Bam!

The leather swinging door far below flung open.

“Victorique!”

It was her usual visitor.

Victorique rose and grabbed onto the staircase’s railing worked with scroll-leaves.

“Victorique, are you there?”

When she noticed the oriental boy looking up, her green eyes narrowed. “Kujou, come up right this instant!”

“What? Now this is new. You usually just ignore me!” There was joy in his voice.

Victorique’s face turned even grumpier. “Stop yapping and start climbing!”

She remained still with a frown on her face, but as Kazuya’s footsteps began tapping up the stairs, Victorique became restless. She sighed, rocked

back and forth, and occasionally looked downstairs over the railing, waiting impatiently for her friend to appear.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Kazuya's rhythmical footsteps reverberated throughout the library.

But the stairs were long. Kazuya had still not made it.

And then, ten minutes later.

“Victorique! Whoa, what are you doing?”

As soon as he stepped onto the landing, a white and fluffy ball rolled toward him with such force that he almost tumbled down the stairs.



Victorique bolted up with a frown, scowling at Kazuya. "You took too long," she said in a husky voice.

"S-Sorry. I climbed as fast as I could, but humans have their limits. I would have loved to use the elevator."

"You? Use the elevator?"

The way she said it ticked Kazuya off. He plopped down beside her and remained silent for a while.

"Why do you have to put it like that?" he finally said. "It's just rude. I gotta teach you how to respect others. Do you know what respect is?"

"You are too bound by values, Kujou."

Kazuya fell silent, disheartened. "Am I?"

"You are."

He furrowed his brows. When he remained silent, Victorique looked at him curiously.

"Do you have a problem?" she asked.

"You bet I do. I got a long list of problems ever since I met you. And when I say long, I mean *long*."

Victorique ignored him, and he sighed.

I can't outargue or outsmart her. But a man has his honor. One day, I will beat her speechless. He sighed once more. *If only I knew her weakness...*

He glanced at Victorique. She was intently peeling the wrapper off a macaroon with her tiny hands. He thought she was going to eat it, but she didn't put the macaroon in her mouth, and instead flipped it around and licked it, repeating the process.

Kazuya watched her curiously. *What's she doing now?*

Victorique fiddled with the macaroon, deep in thought. Eventually her hands stopped. Her mind seemed to be somewhere else. She had forgotten to even eat the macaroon, her favorite snack.

Something was bothering her, it seemed. Kazuya gently poked Victorique's rosy, swollen cheek.

Victorique snapped back to her senses and shot Kazuya a glare. "Don't touch me."

"S-Sorry."

"So what do you want?"

“Right. I got a case. Someone died mysteriously. It sounds like it involves that alchemist you were talking about yesterday. I thought you might be interested, and since Inspector Blois would probably come here anyway, I thought I’d tell you about it. So, are you interested?”

Victorique gave a jerk. She tossed the macaroon aside and poked Kazuya’s cheek over and over.

“Speak,” she said.

“Okay... So it all started with this horror movie I saw yesterday. Ow! There’s a building in the academy that looks exactly like the clock tower in the movie, and it was used as a workshop by the starring alchemist. Ow! Apparently the movie was based on stories about the real alchemist. Yesterday, I saw two strangers when I left the movie theater. One was caucasian, and the other oriental. The oriental man was found dead in the clock tower this morning. He had a strange purple bruise on his index finger, and he mumbled something about the alchemist and Leviathan before he passed away. Ow! I can’t talk properly with you poking my cheek. Hmm? What’s wrong?”

Wearing a grim look, Victorique pulled her finger away from Kazuya’s face. She was thinking. At her feet lay the garish, golden book she had been reading so intently yesterday. She was staring at it silently.

“Speaking of which, the inspector sure is taking his time,” Kazuya muttered. “Normally, he’d act all smug at the crime scene, then come running here to ask for your help. Strange that he’s not coming today. Victorique?”

Victorique sprang to her feet. The sight of her petite figure in a daunting pose made Kazuya chuckle.

“What are you up to this time?”

“Foolish man.”

“You mean Inspector Blois?”

Victorique shook her head. “No.”

“Then me?”

Victorique shook her head again.

Kazuya brows knitted. “I can’t think of anyone else.”

“Leviathan.”

“What? Leviathan?” Shocked, Kazuya stood up. “So you’re saying it was the alchemist who killed the man this morning? But I heard he was

killed by the Royal Knights twenty years ago. Or maybe... Wait, where are you going?"

"Down there."

Victorique started walking, her dress flaring behind her.

Kazuya was stunned when he realized she was heading toward the elevator. "Down there? You mean you're leaving the library? What are you gonna do?"

"Yes, I'm leaving the library," she answered in her husky voice, walking briskly.

Kazuya's mouth was agape. "Oh... so you're heading down there..."

He recalled the countless exchanges he had had with Victorique, and the adventures they had together.

Twice before, Kazuya left the academy with Victorique and traveled to the outside world. But otherwise, he had only seen her either in the mysterious conservatory at the top of the library or in the small special dormitory deep inside the flowerbed maze.

Kazuya tried to imagine Victorique in a classroom, or on a small path through the gardens. He pictured her in her school uniform, taking classes and eating lunch with everyone else in the cafeteria.

He couldn't visualize it properly.

"Why are you heading down there?" Kazuya asked hesitantly.

Victorique turned around. There was something inexplicable in her pale, emerald eyes. Kazuya gulped. It looked like anger, or despair, yet also seemed like delight.

Kazuya realized that he knew nothing about his strange and bizarre little friend. Loneliness and anxiety gripped him.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Are you mad, by any chance?"

Victorique did not answer. A breeze blew through the skylight, rustling her dress and the palm leaves.

"Victorique?"

"I accept his challenge."

"Whose challenge?"

"The alchemist's. That right there is his memoir. I will solve the mystery of Leviathan and stop the killings. The mystery will be hard to crack, I'm sure, but I have my Wellspring of Wisdom. I will pick up the fragments of

chaos that he had scattered around the academy, reconstruct them, and expose his pathetic appearance in broad daylight.”

“So you’re gonna solve the case?”

“That is correct.” Victorique nodded grimly. “I told you before that the history of alchemy is the history of blockheads. I will uncover his secrets and turn his glorious fraudulent tale into a dull and boring chapter of history.”

Kazuya picked up the golden book from the floor. He couldn’t exactly follow what she was saying, but he knew that the book and its author had angered Victorique.

Kazuya followed Victorique as she slowly entered the elevator. “Can I read this?” he asked.

“Go ahead. But...” The elevator’s steel door closed. Victorique pointed to the stairs. “You take the stairs.”

“Oh, come on. You can at least let me in when you use it.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Victorique regarded him with melancholic eyes. “Because, I love seeing you wheezing and gasping for air just to see me, your thighs aching as you plod up and down the stairs!”

“Well, I don’t! You monster!”

“Quit whining and follow me. Adieu, my diligent friend. I will see you downstairs.”

Clank. Clank.

The steel cage carrying Victorique descended into the hall below.

Burning with frustration, anger, and loneliness, Kazuya quickly headed for the stairs.

Damn that little... Why does she have to be so mean? Plus she’s immature, and whimsical...

While descending, he felt curious about the book in his arms, so he opened it.

“Whoa!”

Giant clockworks, a pendulum, a masked man in a robe, and a boy lying down popped out of the book. Kazuya almost tumbled down the stairs from surprise.

A pop-up book. No...

“A pop-up memoir? Now that’s something you don’t see every day.”

He studied the page. For a moment, it was as if the world inside the picture book was actually moving. The clock was ticking, the boy on the floor screaming, and the masked man, Leviathan, cackling at someone.

Sensing a gaze, the man looked up and stared into the huge jet-black eyes of the kind-looking oriental boy peering into the miniature garden. Grinning, he pointed to the ground and commanded the boy to read.

Kazuya snapped back to his senses. He looked at the words the man was pointing at.

It said: **Are you flummoxed? Are you infuriated?**

Kazuya frowned at the provocative text. “Not good. There’s no way Victorique would let this slide. This explains her behavior yesterday. She’s incredibly smart, but also childish and competitive. And this alchemist...” He sighed. “He sounds a bit childish too. I mean, who makes a pop-up memoir, really? With Victorique taking the bait, it now feels like a children’s quarrel. Well, things just got crazy.”

Kazuya’s grim face showed a bit of confusion. Sighing, he turned the page.

“Whoa!”

Something jumped out again. It was, after all, a pop-up memoir.

The setting had switched to a luxurious hall that resembled a royal court. There was a masked man holding out a bright blue rose and a beautiful lady clasping her hands in front of her chest, looking delighted. The lady possessed graceful beauty, a shiny crown sitting on her head.

It was the then Queen of Sauville. Her eyes were closed in ecstasy.

Kazuya ran his eyes over the text.

It began with the following sentence.

Winter, 1899. The cursed nineteenth century, marked by the advancement of science and the decline of sorcery, is coming to an end, and the last year of the century is about to begin.

I, Leviathan, hereby write.

Leviathan 1

Winter, 1899.

The cursed nineteenth century, marked by the advancement of science and the decline of sorcery, is coming to an end, and the last year of the century is about to begin.

I, Leviathan, hereby write.

I beseech you, unlock your heart and lend me your ear. I am the last and most powerful sorcerer of this century. I am an alchemist who created something out of nothing.

Here, I share my story.

Long ago I, Leviathan, was nothing more than a nameless vagabond. I spent my years on long and weary travels. I had been to every corner of Europe, and not content with that, to India, Morocco, and the Dark Continent. Eternity had tried to rob me of my spirit. I was simply wandering.

At the very beginning of my journey, I acquired a stone. I took it from an old man who claimed to be an alchemist. He said that the stone, red as a maiden's fresh blood, was a Philosopher's Stone. I, a rash youth, wanted it, so I killed the old man, thus obtaining eternal life.

Now, this memoir is not about my years of travel. As such, I will begin with the events of two years ago, in the winter of 1897.

That winter, on nothing but a whim, I abandoned my roving lifestyle and visited St. Marguerite Academy in the outskirts of the Kingdom of Sauville, where I was hired as a watchman of the academy's clock tower. I wished to rest my fatigued body, and to have a workshop to study the Philosopher's Stone.

Day and night, I polished the huge clockworks and pendulum in the dim tower. Then, using the same room as my workshop, I began to decipher the ancient manuscripts that I had taken from the old man.

It was not long after that that I found a way to create gold. Following a certain procedure, I used an inexpensive item that was available to anyone, and to my surprise, it quickly turned to gold.

I decided to sell it in the village.

The gold was unmistakably real, and I earned a large sum of money.

I became famous in the village in an instant. My careless nature reared its head, and I told the villagers about alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone.

Soon, messengers arrived from Saubreme. They looked grandiose with their formal attire and trumpets. They read to me a letter from the Queen of Sauville.

I was surprised and delighted at the same time. The queen was a noble who had just married the king, and portraits of her transient beauty had circulated throughout the kingdom. It is no exaggeration to say that the queen was all that people talked about during this time.

The queen's letter was astonishing. She asked me, a drifter alchemist, to come to the palace.

I gave my affirmation to the messengers. I told them that I would be there at the appointed time.

The messengers rode back on their horses, and in their place, a grand army arrived. While the queen's messengers were lovely servants, the king's royal guards were a bunch of big, rugged men lined up in a row. I prepared myself for the worst.

It seemed, however, that they too had business with me. The group was led by an older man dressed in aristocratic fashion. He introduced himself as Baron Musgrave, the Minister of Justice of the Kingdom of Sauville.

A visit from the Minister of Justice right after receiving the queen's invitation. He proclaimed to be the king's envoy. Unlike the amiable attendants, he began questioning me in a very high-handed manner.

"Are you a fraud?" he asked.

"No more than you," I answered flatly.

Baron Musgrave's elegant mustache twitched in anger. As he reached for the long sword at his waist, shouting, there came a voice.

An innocent, carefree laughter. The Baron froze.

The laughter seemed to come from the parked lavish carriage.

The carriage door opened and the owner of the voice jumped out nimbly. To my surprise, it was a boy of only thirteen or fourteen. He introduced

himself as Ian, the eldest son of Baron Musgrave. He had short hair and a face so childlike that he could be mistaken for a woman. The boy approached the masked man in a robe—that is, me—without any sign of fear, and asked me questions.

Apparently, the Baron's eldest son was interested in alchemy. The Baron scolded his son, his shoulders trembling even more from rage.

I could not hide my confusion. Why would the Queen's messengers, and now the Minister of Justice and his son, come to a village in the countryside?

Baron Musgrave, accompanied by his retinue of brawny knights, entered my workshop—the room with the clockworks. At the Baron's orders, the knights searched every inch of my workshop, turning everything upside down and ransacking the place. Someone tugged at my hand, which was trembling with fury and doubt. I looked over my shoulder and saw the boy, Ian.

"The king and my father think you're a fraud," he whispered in my ear. "The queen is ignorant to the ways of the world, so they fear she's being deceived by you."

"Me? A fraud?"

I could not stop laughing upon hearing those words. Ian smiled as well.

"Ian, was it? Do you share their opinion?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. I'm hoping you're the real deal." He looked at me quizzically, stared at the face hidden behind the mask. "The queen has met dozens of people who claim to be alchemists and sorcerers. My father says she must be nervous about her new position in the royal court, so she wants something to hang on to, some great, mysterious power. And she wants that person to protect her. But so far, the queen has only met frauds. That's why the king and my father take preemptive measures."

"I see... But what are they doing in my workshop?"

"They want you to perform alchemy. So they are investigating things beforehand. Does it offend you?"

I laughed at the question. I looked around the darkly-lit workshop, at the room of pendulum and clockworks. There was nothing here. Nothing but my mystical powers. What was there to fear?

The queen's image that I had seen in portraits, her beauty, tinged with uneasiness, came to mind.

At that moment, I felt something in my heart that I had never felt before during my years as a wanderer. A desire. An ambition.

I wanted them, things that were once out of reach for me.

Alluring beauty. Authority. And wealth.

After inspecting my workshop, the baron ordered his men to lock me up inside with only a little food.

“You will not leave this place until you produce gold,” Baron Musgrave declared. “You will stay here for years as punishment for deceiving the masses.”

“Three days,” I said.

“What?”

“Open the door in three days. I will give you the gold then. If I manage to produce gold, you will let me see the queen.”

The baron was taken aback.

“Should I fail, you may hang me.”

In the morning three days later, the door slowly opened. I saw the baron’s pale face, Ian peering anxiously at his side, and the royal guards.

I staggered toward the baron, breathing heavily, and presented to him a nugget of gold.

Yes. A shiny, nugget of gold that was sitting on my gloved hand.

The baron gasped and looked around the workshop.

“How in the world did you do it?” he asked. “There are no other ways out of this place. We searched the whole workshop, and the building was surrounded. You fraud! How did you do it?!”

“Take me to the queen,” I groaned, before collapsing on the floor. “I shall protect her.” A snicker escaped the corner of my mouth.

I had wandered aimlessly for eternity, in what seemed like a never-ending nightmare.

The time had finally come.

I will crawl out of hell—the hell that appeared from underneath the earth a long time ago.

The royal palace of Sauville welcomed me.

The queen was so emotional that she almost fainted. I was pleased by her reaction. The queen was young, beautiful, lonely, and she seemed to have a great interest in the mystic arts.

The King of Sauville, on the other hand, regarded me with suspicion. The king was a grown man, but he was young and quite handsome. I noticed that his eyes held not only suspicion, but a glimmer of expectation.

I knew exactly what the king was thinking. Sauville was in dire financial straits. As the end of the century approached, the sound of war could be heard coming from across Europe. The small kingdom needed tremendous financial resources to survive. The more, the better. The king desperately wanted gold, and he was willing to give the queen away for it.

And the queen herself feared that her youthful and lovely appearance would one day fade. She was willing to do anything to obtain immortality, one of the products of alchemy.

I humbled myself and greeted them both. I told them how I loved Sauville and how I wanted to serve the kingdom.

Among the lavish decorations of the palace, I found a vase of flowers and picked one up.

A white rose.

“Your Majesties,” I said, “As proof of my loyalty to you, I will turn this colorless white rose into a blue one as a blessing of your union.”

The queen was delighted. The crest of the royal family of Sauville featured a blue rose.

“Preposterous!” Baron Musgrave, sitting at the furthest seat, hissed. “There is no such thing as a blue rose. There are flowers of all colors in the world, but no one can create a blue rose. It’s impossible!”

“With alchemy, nothing is impossible.”

“Nonsense!”

I looked at the king. He was regarding me with a frown. His eyes were filled with suspicion.

“I have a proposal, Your Majesty. If I fail to bring forth a blue rose, you may execute me. I am not afraid. But if I am successful...”

And so I expressed my wish.

The Kingdom of Sauville, like other European powers, had been pouring resources into colonial policies since the turn of the century. A percentage of their wealth came from the treasures of the Dark Continent across the

sea. Spices, pepper, coffee beans, diamonds, and artifacts from archaeological sites—infinite wealth from tropical islands, India, and the African continent.

I asked for a chance to express my opinion on colonial policies. The king's brows knitted, but he eventually agreed.

"Very well," he said.

The baron and the queen watched with bated breath.

I gently grasped the white rose and poured my strength into it.

I struggled. I was shivering, sweating, my whole body shaking. A stir spread through the palace. Slowly, I opened my eyes and saw the white rose in my hand slowly turning bright blue.

The queen let out a gasp of admiration. She closed her eyes and clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

Then slowly she descended from her throne and knelt before me, deeply moved. I politely offered her the blue rose.

"Ah, my dear alchemist!" she exclaimed as she accepted the flower.

"All my power belongs to you, my beautiful queen. From now and forever more."

Under the mask, I was smiling.

I was pleased.

And when I lifted my head, I saw the king glaring at me with dark eyes.

I returned to the clock tower in the village and continued producing gold in my workshop. At the royal court, I curried the queen's favor and offered my opinion on the colonial policies. The queen revered me, pampered me, and wanted to take this mysterious masked man with her wherever she went.

I continued to give gold to the king. I also promised to cast a magic spell on the queen so she would never age, despite the fact that she was young and lovely enough to not have to worry about such things.

One day, the king stopped me in the opulent corridors of the royal palace.

"Who are you really?" he demanded.

"...What?"

"One king is enough for a kingdom. What are you planning? What are you after?"

I laughed at his words. How could the king possibly know my true objective?

The king feared me and at some point began to call me Leviathan, the incarnation of the serpent that gave Adam and Eve the forbidden apple in the Bible. The Leviathan was a gigantic, immortal monster with the power to destroy the world.

The king regarded me with cold eyes.

“Leviathan, the alchemist! Sinister man. You have brought wealth to my kingdom and stolen the heart of my precious queen. Who are you? What are you hiding under that mask?”

Fear suddenly gripped my heart. Fear that the king would one day unmask me. Unsolved mysteries can eat away at one’s mind. The king must spend sleepless nights thinking only of this mask, which I never removed even when my queen begged me to.

If my mask is peeled off, it will be the end of me.

My eternal life will be extinguished at that moment, and my body will return to the earth as it was supposed to ages ago.

I write this memoir now, winter of 1899.

I can no longer bear the weight of my sin. At that time, I was simply desperate. I had no other choice. Somewhere down the line, I must have gone mad.

Was it when I met the queen, an innocent femme fatale? Or was I already mad when I perished a long, long time ago, and rose back to life?

My sin was not my deception of the king and his ministers.

Nor was it my manipulation of the innocent queen.

No...

My sin was brutally murdering Ian, the son of Baron Musgrave.

Ian, the boy who smiled at me the day I first met him. Two years later, in the clockwork room, he collapsed at my feet, screaming in agony. Hot, golden liquid flowed down his slender throat and tore through his smooth white belly from the inside, spilling out along with fresh blood and ruptured entrails.

The last gold I ever made.

Ian de Musgrave died a horrible death.

I killed him.

No one knows how I did it.

You, of the future.

Are you a man?

A woman?

An adult?

A child?

It matters not. Save me. I cannot bear the weight of my sin! Should the time of my death come, my soul will forever linger in the clock tower where Ian died.

I killed Ian.

And I shall continue to kill.

I will roam the clock tower for eternity as a vile murderer.

Chapter 2: The Clockwork's Dark Past

The U-shaped school building standing in the middle of the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy had stone halls, high-ceilinged hallways, and staircases so complex as to seem like mazes from the eyes of a new student.

On the second floor of the school building, in the usual spacious classroom, students—sophisticated but a little too unapproachable children of nobility—had already gathered and taken their seats. It was around 8:30 in the morning. They glanced at each other, waiting for their homeroom teacher, who should have arrived by now.

With exams in all subjects done and only a few classes remaining, the students were more relaxed than ever, chatting and doing their hair.

Avril, an international student, was lounging by the window of the classroom, her chin resting on her hand. She was wearing a frown. A summer breeze blowing through the window stirred her short blonde hair.

“He’s late. Morning class is about to start,” she mumbled with a sigh.

Outside, the garden glistened under the summer sun, thick shrubs glowing bright-green. Birds perched on the roof of the small square gazebos chattered.

“An honor student who never comes in late or leaves early, but when it comes to the library, this happens,” Avril grumbled, watching the garden from the second-floor window. “How cute is that girl in the library anyway? I’m not bad-looking either... I think... Actually, I don’t know.”

Like a dog scolded by its owner, Avril cast her eyes down, dejected.

Birds chirped once more from atop the gazebo.

“What if the me I see in the mirror is just my mind dolling me up? Maybe in Kujou’s eyes, I look like a very plain, typical English woman. No!”

Avril poked a nearby female student with pigtails, who was flipping through her textbook. She looked up with a frown, her almond-shaped eyes narrowing.

“What?” she huffed.

“Be honest,” Avril said. “How do I look?”

“Well... It pains me to admit it, but I think you’re the prettiest girl in class.”

“Really?”

The girl nodded a couple of times and turned her attention back to her textbook. Delighted, Avril began tugging at her hair and fixing it.

“Where is he?” she mumbled again, looking out the window.

Her eyes caught something white.

“Huh?” She rose to her feet.

It was trotting along the bright pathway toward the school building. She had never seen something like it before.

A doll.

It was a porcelain doll with long, bright golden hair that hung down to its feet like an untied velvet turban. The white ruffles and pink laces of its dress swayed softly as it walked, pearl buttons glinting in the morning sun. It was just outside the window, crossing the path in front of the school building. Avril couldn’t see its face clearly, but it was small, with fluffy frills and golden hair. It was a captivating doll, grabbing hold of Avril’s heart and not letting go.

“What a pretty doll! Is it an antique? Mass-produced dolls in this century don’t look like that. It’s so sparkly, so fair and smooth, and those rosy cheeks! Plus it’s walking like an actual human being... Wait, huh?” Avril leaned forward. “It’s walking!” she exclaimed.

“Keep it down,” the female student growled, lifting her head.

“S-Sorry... I just saw a doll walking around like a human being. Historic schools are just different, huh? Weird stuff happening so early in the morning.”

“What are you talking about? English women sure are stupid.”

“What did you say?!” She turned her gaze back to the window. “Huh?!”

“What is it this time?”

“I know who owns the walking doll. It’s Ms. Cecile!”

Ms. Cecile, who was hurrying down the path toward the school building, noticed the walking doll and rushed over. Unaware that Avril was watching, she started arguing with the walking doll. The teacher was getting angry, but the doll snubbed her and tried to walk away. Ms. Cecile, however, was

not to be outdone. Having enough of the doll's tantrum, she spread her arms wide...

"She lifted it," Avril said.

"Well, of course," the female student scoffed. "It's a doll, after all."

Avril watched as the teacher slid her arms into the doll's sides from behind, lifted it up, and dragged it toward the school building. The doll's face turned crimson as it flailed its arms and legs in resistance. The lace of her dress billowed majestically, and her pink petticoat rippled in the wind. It seemed, for a moment, like a rose blooming.

Then, an oriental boy—Kazuya Kujou—came walking from the end of the pathway with a straight posture. He was carrying a huge golden book under his arm. Kazuya looked up when he noticed the commotion, and for some reason jumped when he saw the doll. He ran up to the doll, and started arguing with it along with Ms. Cecile.

"Kujou too? What on earth is going on here?" Avril wondered.

"Why don't you close the window and prepare for the lesson?" her classmate said.

"But the moving doll..."



“Avril Bradley. This academy is riddled with horror stories. Statues drink at night, empty suits of armor run around, and a classmate who never comes to class is a Gray Wolf. A moving doll is no big deal. Please go back to your seat. You’ve been disturbing me for a while now.”

Shrugging, Avril jumped off the female student’s desk, which she had climbed onto to get a better look out the window, and reluctantly returned to her seat, opening her textbook.

“Shut up, stupid Cecile!” Victorique shrieked as she flailed about. “I am going to the clock tower. Only in there can the mystery of the Leviathan be exposed to the light of day. My Wellspring of Wisdom says so. Get out of my way! I’m not going to any stupid classroom!”

Ms. Cecile was walking down the corridor with Victorique in her arms.

“Let me go! I don’t want to go to class!”

“Why not?” Kazuya, walking along beside them, asked.

Enraged, Victorique’s face turned red as an apple. “Because there’s lots of kids in there!”

“You’re a kid too. And so am I.”

“I can’t stand it when there’s too many of them!”

“Come on. You can at least show up for a little bit. You’ve been in the library this whole time. It wouldn’t hurt to show your face in the classroom during that rare moment you actually come down.”

“I said I don’t want to!”

“All classes are canceled today anyway,” Ms. Cecile said serenely.

“With the incident on campus and all. You don’t have to stay long.”

“No!”

As Victorique thrashed about, her heel hit Ms. Cecile in the stomach. The teacher groaned and scowled. Then, standing in front of the classroom with a smile, she casually tossed Victorique inside.

The appearance of the sudden intruder silenced the noisy classroom.

Avril, reading her textbook, heard squabbling coming from the hallway, followed by something being tossed into the classroom.

“It’s the doll from earlier!” she gasped.

The doll covered in white ruffles and pink lace remained still for a while, then eventually rose, slowly, as if wary of its surroundings. It swept a surreptitious glance at the room.

The students stared at the mass of frills with bated breath.

Soon after, a boy—Kazuya Kujou, an international student from the Orient, whom the students feared and called the Reaper—entered the room and casually reached for the doll. He gripped the doll's tiny hand and helped it up, wearing a soft smile that Avril loved so much.

"I bet you don't know where your seat is," he said. "This way, Victorique."

The classroom stirred. Students exchanged glances.

V-Victorique?!

Avril swallowed. She studied the tiny, beautiful, angelic girl, whom she mistook for an elaborate porcelain doll.

Her beauty could not be measured with ordinary standards. She had skin that was smooth and white like porcelain, and her cheeks were a lovely rosy color. Her body, clothed in a wonderful dress, was so small, and her head, hands, every part of her, made her look like an intricate doll crafted for the gods. Despite her extravagant dress, her long golden hair, which almost reached her feet, was neither braided nor tied, simply hanging down her back. It gave her a mysterious, distinctive air—petite, beautiful, and quiet, yet somehow vicious.

The girl—the legendary truant Victorique de Blois, whom no one had ever seen before, despite there being countless rumors about her, that she was the illegitimate child of a noble, or the reincarnation of a Gray Wolf—seemed even more extraordinary in person. Avril observed the small, beautiful girl whose dignified aura overwhelmed everyone present, and Kazuya Kujou, who held her hand in the most casual manner possible, talking to her as he guided her to her seat.

Avril wore a blank expression for a while, but eventually she looked teary-eyed, her lips trembling.

Noticing her gaze, Kazuya looked at her. He smiled as their eyes met.

"Hey, Avril."

"H-Hey..."

"Sorry about earlier. Talk to you later."

"Okay..."

Kazuya's smile provided her a bit of relief. She glanced back at Victorique de Blois, who was sitting by the window, looking downward and staring at the tip of her shoes.

Victorique looked restless, casting anxious glances at her surroundings and then directing her gaze back down again. Her cheeks had turned from rosy to dark from anger or fear. Her milky skin turned pale. Avril felt a little worried. She looked at Kazuya, but he seemed unaware. He was sitting up straight and staring at Ms. Cecile standing at the podium.

“Everyone, something actually happened this morning, so classes are canceled for the day,” the teacher announced. “Before I dismiss you, I will return your exams, so please come forward if your name is called. Afterwards, you should return to your dorm rooms and continue studying on your own. Don’t slack off just because it’s almost summer break.”

Ms. Cecile started calling each student by name and returning their exam papers.

Victorique, on the other hand, looked as if she was about to pass out and fall out of her chair. Avril glanced around restlessly. The feelings of anger and concern toward this girl she had never met before left her confused.

Argh, darn it... Let me just mess around with her a little bit. Just a little bit. Then maybe we’ll both feel better.

Avril slowly stretched her hand out. Victorique, staring at her shoes, was unmoving, her long golden hair hanging down to the floor. Avril grabbed a tuft of her golden hair and whispered.

“Hey, Gray Wolf! She-wolf. Monster. Monster!” She pulled on her hair just a little so it wouldn’t hurt.

Victorique swiftly turned around.

Avril’s smiling face contorted with fear. Victorique was holding a desk. Her eyes, which Avril now saw up close for the first time, were a pale green color, with a mystical glow in them that said she was neither a child nor an adult, and her face was horrifyingly devoid of emotion. She lifted the desk with both hands, and without hesitation, threw it at Avril, toppling her backward.

“Insolent girl,” Victorique said in a raspy voice, lower and grimmer than anything Avril had heard before. “Don’t you dare touch me!”

“S-Sorry, I meant no offense,” Avril muttered. “Gray Wolves are terrifying...”

Avril lost consciousness.

Avril woke up in the infirmary to find the unapproachable, beautiful girl in laces and ruffles sitting in front of her. Kazuya was there too, pushing her beautiful little head down.

“Oh, you’re up,” Kazuya said, and pushed the terrifying girl’s head even harder. “Go on, Victorique.”

“I will *not* apologize,” she replied in the same husky voice.

Avril was again surprised to learn that the grim, low voice, which sounded as if it came from the depths of the earth, undoubtedly belonged to Victorique de Blois.

“I said I won’t apologize, and that’s that. This woman called me a monster. But I am definitely not a monster.”

“She knows that. I’m sure she was just teasing you.”

Avril bolted upright. Standing, she realized just how small Victorique really was.

“Um, sorry about earlier,” Avril said. “I didn’t think you’d get that mad. I’m sorry for what I said.”

Victorique looked at her warily, wearing an odd expression on her face, almost like fear. She was biting her glossy lips with her small pearly teeth.

“You heard her,” Kazuya said. “Let me introduce you two. This is Avril Bradley. She’s a student from England. And Avril, this is Victorique de Blois. Uh, wait a sec. Victorique, did you apologize to Avril yet?”

“I am not apologizing.” Victorique looked away.

“Now, listen here!” Kazuya growled.

Victorique jumped like a scared kitten. Then, with an even deeper frown, she shook her tiny head. Her magnificent golden hair, cascading down to her feet like a golden veil, swayed elegantly.

“I. Will. Not. Apologize!”

“Why not?” Kazuya asked.

Victorique snorted. “Because she is not human. She’s a farting newt. And I will not talk to a newt.” She cast her gaze down.

“What did you say?!” Kazuya grabbed her chin with both hands and forced her to look up.

“Let go of me! How dare you grab my chin!” She thrashed around.

“S-Stop it, Kujou!” Avril cut in. “You’re being too rough on her.”

“I’m just teaching this farting Victorique some manners,” Kazuya said in a level voice, still holding Victorique’s chin. “Come on, Victorique. I’m not

letting go until you apologize. You won't be able to eat your macaroons, smoke your pipe, or read your book. Are you okay with that?"

"Get off me! You slow-witted, dumb, rascal!"

"Stop it, Kujou!"

"I'm not going to."

While the three were engaged in a squabble, the door to the infirmary opened.

"Oh?"

Ms. Cecile stood there, staring at them.



Kazuya, his hands now off his friend's chin, a pouting Victorique, a flustered Avril, and Ms. Cecile left the infirmary and headed toward the clock tower.

As they walked down the path, Kazuya wondered how to explain Victorique to Avril. It was actually the superior intellect of Victorique de Blois, the fairy of the library tower—her Wellspring of Wisdom, specifically—that solved the case of the Purple Book that involved Avril, who had just arrived from England back then. But Avril wasn't aware of that. While Kazuya wondered if he should start from the beginning, Avril seemed to be preoccupied with something else and started talking about something that had been bothering her since yesterday.

"So we were playing with a planchette yesterday in the clock tower, right?" she said. "That was actually a ritual to call forth spirits to tell us about the afterlife, and we must never stop halfway. But we let go of the planchette. Then an incident happened afterward. I was thinking that maybe we summoned an evil spirit and it never left."

"That sounds like something a farting newt would say—blegh."

Kazuya silenced Victorique with his special move—the chin grab.

"Get off me! You've been incredibly bold lately!"

"As your dutiful friend, farting Victorique, I'm just teaching you manners. Ouch! Why'd you bite me?!"

Kazuya had forgotten all about the Wellspring of Wisdom. He focused solely on grabbing Victorique by the chin.

Leaving Kazuya and Victorique alone, Ms. Cecile said, "That's just an old wives' tale, Avril."

"B-But..."

"We're not supposed to tell students about things in the past, but since all sorts of mysterious incidents happen in this academy..."

Realizing that Ms. Cecile was about to share something important, Kazuya and Victorique stopped squabbling and listened.

"There's a reason why I kicked you both out of the clock tower yesterday. It's actually not the first time that people died in that clock tower under mysterious circumstances."

"Did someone die like this before?" Kazuya asked.

Ms. Cecile shook her head. "Not just once."

"What—"

“Five times.”

Kazuya, Victorique, and Avril stopped in their tracks, glanced at each other, then turned their eyes back to Ms. Cecile.

“It’s been happening since the beginning of the century. The alchemist Leviathan lived there for two years starting in 1897, so the deaths started after he was gone. Anyway, in about twenty years since the beginning of the century, five people have died suspicious deaths in that clockwork room. That’s one every four years. For some reason, they always found themselves in the workshop, not anywhere else in the tower, and like this morning, they always ended up dead with a purple bruise on the index finger of their right hand. The coroner’s findings were always the same: they died from poison injected through their fingers. They had something else in common. They were not students of the academy. They were either new teachers, visitors, trespassing travelers—in other words, outsiders.”

The four left the school building and ambled along the pathway leading to the clock tower. The summer sun was burning stronger now. The flowers in the flowerbeds and the leaves on the trees glittered brightly.

“I don’t even need to hear about the autopsy results to know. The cause of death was probably poison through his fingertips. The man was poisoned.”

“Who’s the culprit?” Avril asked.

“I don’t know. But in some of the past cases, the victim died in the clockwork room locked from the inside. This gave birth to the rumor that the clock tower is haunted by the ghost of the alchemist, who reigned over Sauville all those years ago. Of course, it’s just a rumor, but I didn’t want to let my precious students near that place. So I keep the door locked, but from time to time, someone gets curious and opens it. They pry open the locks, or kick in the door.”

Avril turned red and cast her eyes downward.

Kazuya quickly shifted the subject. “But if I recall correctly, the royal guards attacked the alchemist in the clock tower. Even after getting hit by poisoned arrows, he escaped and his body was never found.”

“That’s right. They searched the whole campus, the village, and the nearby forests, but couldn’t find him anywhere. Either he died deep in the woods, or…” Ms. Cecile chuckled. “Legends say he was really immortal, that he took off his mask and robe and fled to a faraway land.”

Up ahead, the red-haired companion of the murdered oriental man passed by. Inspector Blois had suspected him of the murder, but he insisted that he was at the inn the whole time, and unless he could be at two places at the same time, he couldn't have committed the crime. He wore his hat low and walked with his eyes on the ground, and when he noticed Kazuya and the others, he pulled his hat even lower.

From the opposite side, a large man who looked to be in his sixties walked along, carrying carpentry tools on his broad shoulders, and passed by the red-haired man.

"Who's the big guy?" Kazuya asked.

Ms. Cecile looked across the pathway and nodded. "Ah, he's a carpenter. He's been working at the academy for almost twenty years now. I asked him to do some repair work."

"Wow, he's been around for a while, huh?"

"Same with the gardener. I think he's been here longer than the carpenter. Over twenty years, from what I've heard."

The old carpenter turned his gaze to them. Two eyes shone darkly on his wrinkled face.

Kazuya returned the topic back to the missing masked man. "The alchemist died or disappeared only a little over twenty years ago. If the poison didn't kill him, and he just took off his mask and robe and escaped, maybe he's still alive. It's possible that he didn't flee the kingdom, and instead is hiding somewhere in the academy. Actually, he doesn't even need to hide. No one has seen his face, after all. I think it's more realistic than the whole ghost-killing-people theory."

"Wrong," Victorique, stroking her chin, interjected. "Leviathan is long dead. He's just stubbornly hiding that fact."

"So who's killing people in the workshop, then? And how are they doing it? Who's been killing intruders the past twenty years? They ignore students, and only kill suspicious outsiders. Only a living human with a will can do that."

Victorique fell silent. Kazuya glanced at her face. She was pouting like a child.

Avril nodded in agreement with Kazuya. "I see. Kujou, you're so smart!"

Victorique pursed her lips even tighter and kicked a pebble. “If that’s what you think,” she spat, “go ahead and search for the living alchemist. *I* will look for his shriveled corpse. To hell with you.”

“What?”

The group had just arrived at the clock tower.

The area around the clock tower was untouched by the light and heat of the summer sun. Creepy cobwebs that looked like burial clothes, and dead branches clawing at the air like blackened skeletons, rustled ominously in the wind.

Inspector Blois, standing in front of the tower, frowned when he saw Kazuya and his half-sister, Victorique.

“You don’t see this often,” he grumbled.

When Kazuya saw him this morning, his hair was dancing softly in the wind, but now it was back to its usual drill shape. As they got closer, Kazuya saw Inspector Blois’s head being swarmed by bees, flies, and large butterflies. His two subordinates had unlinked their hands for once, desperately fanning the insects away.

Avril poked Kazuya and whispered in his ear. “See? I told you he’s weird.”

“I know. This is not the first time.”

Inspector Blois sauntered toward the group, and put his hands on his hips and his right leg in front in a splendid pose.

“What are you doing here, Ms. Cecile, Kujou, V-Victorique, and you are...?”

“My name is Avril Bradley, an international student from England.” Avril pointed to the inspector’s head. “Weird.”

“I know that! It’s complicated, out of my control.”

“Why are bugs swarming you?”

“I didn’t have time, so I fixed my hair with sugared water. And then this happened. I’m having a bit of trouble right now.”

Kazuya and Avril exchanged glances.

Frowning, Inspector Blois started walking down the pathway, moving further and further away from the clock tower.

A gust blew in front of the clock tower, shaking the dead branches. Students returning to their dormitories stole glances as they passed by.

Inspector Blois took out his pipe and ignited it in the most casual way possible. Kazuya found his behavior suspicious.

“Excuse me, Inspector,” Kazuya said, walking up to the man.

The inspector wearily turned around. “What is it?”

“You look so... relaxed. I thought you would go to the library to find out what happened, so I waited for a while, but there was no sign of you coming at all. And now you’re just standing there smoking a pipe. It doesn’t look like you’re investigating the clock tower at all.”

“I was doing just that earlier.”

“If you were, you wouldn’t have had time to fix your hair.”

“Ahem...” The inspector started fidgeting, changing poses several times, and adjusting his hair. “If this happened in the village, I would go all out,” he said with a sigh. “Unfortunately, this happened on St. Marguerite Academy’s campus. I don’t want to dig into this school’s past.”

“What do you mean by that?”

When the inspector was sure that the others were not listening, he whispered, “Listen. St. Marguerite Academy only began accepting international students such as yourself several years ago. For hundreds of years before that, the school was kept secret and off-limits to outsiders. Do you know why?”

“No...”

“A handful of Europe’s dark history lie dormant here, and they must not be awakened. The government wants to keep it that way. It is said that for centuries after the Middle Ages, St. Marguerite Academy served as a front for the secret royal armory. Once it sheltered French aristocrats fleeing the Revolution and Protestants persecuted by Catholics. Newly-developed weapons of the future were also hidden here. Characters who should’ve died lived the rest of their lives here. Do you understand? Such things must never see the light of the day. It will affect our current diplomatic relations. The academy has silently swallowed up many a horrible secrets, life, and death, with its big mouth.”

Kazuya studied Inspector Blois’ face with surprise. For once, he was actually serious.

The scorching summer sun beat down mercilessly on the two men. Inspector Blois’s drill-shaped hair gleamed. The heat had caused the sugar water to melt.

Lifting his droopy hair with both hands, Inspector Blois continued. “Of course, those things happened a long time ago. After the Great War, the culture of secrecy was abolished, and international students like you are welcomed with open arms. But make no mistake. Those distant nightmares occasionally wake up from their dark slumber and cause mischief. They become the horror stories that pervade the school, luring boys and girls living in the present day back to the unknown.”

“Oh...”

“As such, I don’t really want to investigate this case. I don’t care if it stays cold. If I don’t learn anything by the end of the day, I’m leaving.”

“But...” Kazuya refused to back down.

The carpenter from earlier crossed their vision again. He walked slowly with his heavy-looking carpentry tools slung over his shoulder.

“This isn’t the first time this happened, right?” Kazuya said eagerly. “If someone—for example, the alchemist who’s supposed to be dead or his descendant—is lurking in the clock tower and continues to kill, you can’t just ignore them. What if more people die in the future?”

The inspector did not answer.

The wind blew, shaking the dead branches and the tip of the inspector’s hair.

When Kazuya returned to the group looking disgruntled, Avril was enthusiastically explaining her ghost theory.

“There was no one else in the room, and it was locked from inside. It has to be a ghost.”

“Stop talking about ghosts, please,” Ms. Cecile said, removing her glasses. “I can’t handle it.”

Avril, seeing Kazuya return, became more eager. “Why don’t we all go down to the village to gather information? Like rumors about the clock tower, and info about the victim.”

Kazuya was hesitant at first, but when he realized that there was no stopping Avril when she was this enthusiastic, he reluctantly agreed.

“I guess it’s fine,” he said.

Avril nodded happily, then turned to Victorique. “Come with us, Victorique,” she said brightly.

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile exchanged looks.

Victorique let out a small gasp.

For reasons unknown, Victorique de Blois, born to Marquis de Blois and a mysterious dancer, was confined at St. Marguerite Academy and was not allowed to go outside without permission. Avril, of course, was unaware of this.

Victorique studied Avril's smile for a while. She looked sad.

Suddenly, an expression of irritation and anger flashed across Victorique's ruthless, yet stunningly beautiful face.

She looked away. "I'm not going."

"Really?" Avril replied, disappointed.

Sensing the gloomy atmosphere, Kazuya attempted to cut in, but before he could speak to cover for Victorique, she went on, annoyed.

"Go with Kujou wherever you want. They say that two heads are better than one, but not when those heads belong to morons. Go ahead and waste your time, farting newt."

Avril, shocked by the tongue-lashing, just stared vacantly at the tiny girl.

"Victorique!" Kazuya snapped, grabbing her little chin.

This time, Victorique didn't fight back. When Kazuya peered into her small face, she stared back at him, stubbornly biting her lip.

Kazuya gave up and removed his hand from her face. "What in the world is wrong with you today? Avril might have called you a monster first, but she apologized and never said it again. But you keep calling her a farting newt. What's the matter with you?"

Victorique's emerald eyes widened to their fullest at Kazuya's enraged expression. A single pearl of tear, which Kazuya failed to notice, formed in the corner of her eye.

"You haven't apologized even once," he went on. "It's just wrong. Come on, now. Apologize to Avril."

"...way."

"What?"

"No way!" Victorique shouted.

Avril quickly stepped in between the two. "It's okay, Kujou. I'm not that mad about it."

"Stay out of this, Avril," Kazuya said. "Victorique, I thought you were nicer than this. You're always mean, cold, and unapproachable, but when I'm in trouble, you always help me out. But something's wrong with you today. Talk to me. You're my closest friend."

Avril froze at Kazuya's last words. Her face, always so bright and cheerful, clouded over. Upset, she kicked a fist-sized stone that was lying by her feet. Then, she picked it up, grumbling as she tossed it back and forth between her hands.

"Closest friend... Closest friend... I see, it's not me. Okay..."

She put the stone on top of her head and started rocking from side to side.

"Farting Kujou!" she mumbled with a frown.

Kazuya turned around. He looked at Avril's face and then the stone sitting on her head.

Come to think of it, she sometimes puts random stuff on her head.

Avril continued rocking.

A dry summer breeze blew past.

Kazuya snapped back to his senses and turned to Victorique, who remained silent, looking even more stubborn than before.

"Victorique, do you understand what I'm trying to say?" Kazuya said in an exasperated tone.

"..."

"Hey, Victorique. Say something, will you? Darn it..."

Victorique hung her head lower and lower. Kazuya studied her curiously, but anger slowly rose within him.

"Okay, fine. If that's how you want to act, so be it. We're done!"

Victorique swallowed and lifted her head a little. No one noticed the flicker of sadness in her eyes.

Kazuya's stubborn nature had reared its head. He turned his back to Victorique and walked away. Avril was quite literally stunned. She had never seen Kazuya Kujou angry before. She immediately removed the stone from her head. Ms. Cecile had taken off her glasses.

Avril glanced at Kazuya and then at Victorique, who was still looking downward. She tossed the stone aside and followed Kazuya as he hurried away.

"Why don't we have a competition?" Avril said. "You and I will go to the village to gather information. And Victorique, uhh, will check the clock tower with Ms. Cecile. We'll meet around here at noon and have lunch together, then battle it out. Who can solve the alchemist's mystery first?"

Kazuya looked over his shoulder. “You can’t win against Victorique,” he said flatly.

Avril, who’d only witnessed Victorique’s beauty and not her brain, shot Victorique a curious look.

“Really? N-No way. We never know. All right, then. We’ll meet back here at noon.” Avril said cheerfully and started running after Kazuya.

While heading for the main gate, she turned around to see Victorique standing alone in the middle of the pathway, staring at Kazuya.

Her cherry lips trembled. She tried to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out.

Victorique looked so small and lonely that Avril could not bring herself to leave her behind. She turned to Kazuya, but he just kept walking. Troubled and confused, Avril ran back to the terrifying, sharp-tongued, but beautiful girl in frills and laces.

“D-Do you want to come with us?” Avril asked.

Victorique did not answer. She raised her head a little, and opened her lips as if she wanted to say something, but in the end, said nothing. She simply shook her head, slowly, sullenly.

“Okay... See you later, then.”

Avril took off once more.

Kazuya, and then Avril, walked out of the campus through the main gate. Victorique stood there for a long time, watching them go, a tiny, lonely figure.

Suddenly, Victorique kicked a pebble and tried to run after them. Ruffles bouncing, she only managed a few steps before someone grabbed her by the scruff of her neck.

She was hoisted up like a kitten, and returned back to her spot. Victorique looked up with teary eyes, and there stood Inspector Blois, his drill-shaped hair sagging.

He regarded Victorique sternly.

“You can’t go.”

“I know.”

“Do not go outside. You, too, are a piece of Europe’s dark history. You are not allowed to take even one step out of this place. You’re different from those carefree students.”

“I know that. So keep your mouth shut, pinhead!”

“You’re the one who made it like this!”

Victorique stayed silent. Suddenly, she spun and started running toward the clock tower. A moment later, her small, slender legs got tangled and she tumbled.

She let out a groan as she fell flat on the ground. Layers of ruffles billowed.

Victorique remained still for a while, bearing the pain. Then, she sprang up and began dusting off the dirt from her face, hair, and hands.

She sobbed faintly. “Stupid Kujou,” she mumbled. “He didn’t have to get so angry. Meanie,” she said in between sobs.

Victorique slowly stood up. With Kazuya gone, she fixed her dress herself, then walked slowly this time.

She heard footsteps following her behind. Loud footsteps produced by long strides. It stopped behind Victorique.

It was Inspector Blois. He looked serious.

“And how are you involved in this case?” he asked.

“Are you curious?”

“Of course.” Inspector Blois nodded grimly. “Those two... No. Just the English student. I can tell that she finds this case amusing. What I don’t understand is you. Why did you come all the way down from the library? Is there something more to this case? What are you plotting?”

Victorique snorted. “The alchemist Leviathan challenged me.” She held out a golden book.

Inspector Blois flipped through its pop-up pages and scoffed. “A memoir of the dead, huh? Hmm... As you may know, my dear half-sister, this man must be kept locked in the dark. Whatever powers he may have had, whatever plans he may have formulated, all of that are gone, buried along with the rest of Europe’s dark history. For the sake of the Kingdom of Sauville, for the sake of the king and queen. And of course, for the sake of the Blois family.”

“I understand,” Victorique replied curtly.

She resumed walking, but the inspector blocked her path.

“Do you really understand, though? If you do, don’t pursue this case—”

“Grevil,” Victorique muttered in her husky voice.

Her eyes were completely different from those of the little helpless girl who, just a few moments before, had been upset at her friend. They were

dark and deep, like the eyes of a hundred-year-old man. They were mysterious, bottomless green pools.

“The truth is, I’m very bored. Do you understand, Grevil? My foolish half-brother. My father, terrified of me, tossed me in here. I cannot leave. So here I am, drifting in an abyss of boredom, a fate worse than death. I have reached my limit.”

Victorique turned her back to her brother and walked away, ruffles flaring behind.

“I may not be able to step outside, but this academy is enough. Fragments of chaos await me. I will solve the mystery of the Leviathan, Grevil, to stave off my boredom.”

“No one dies, understand?”

“Don’t worry. No one will. I’m just shining a little bit of light into the abyss.”

Victorique moved further and further away.

Inspector Blois stood still, glowering at her.

African Song

African Song

*Africans say,
March, march I say!
Till the hens sing!
Till the stars fall from the torn roof!
Du da du da doo...
Even in dreams
March, march I say!
Du da du da doo...
From afar, the Africans came.
They walked, and walked, all the way.
Walk, walk I say!
Du da du da doo...
Africans came from across the sea.
They rowed their boats, rowed their boats, all the way.
Row, row I say!
Pretty sisters, mother, and father!
Flesh and blood is cheap, bread is expensive, but keep on rowing!
Du da du da doo...
Gold and black skin
Row, row I say!
Du da du da doo...
The Africans leapt over the scorching land,
screamed, and disappeared.*

Chapter 3: Monstre Charmant

The village streets were bustling with people. A woman was carrying a shopping basket with a long loaf of bread sticking out of it, and a young man was pulling a cart loaded with vegetables. A wagon pulled by a long-haired horse lumbered along the street, loaded with straw that smelled of the distinctive sweet and sour fragrance of summer.

Tangled vines and red geraniums hanging from wooden-framed houses glistened in the summer sun.

Kazuya and Avril were walking at a brisk pace along the busy street.

“You’re unbelievable,” Avril mumbled.

Kazuya lifted his head. “Did you say something?”

“No... Actually, I did. I said you’re unbelievable. And I was going to say you can be childish too.”

“Me? Childish?” Kazuya stopped in his tracks.

Avril’s lively and pretty face looked a bit downcast.

“Where’d this come from?” Kazuya asked, a little uneasy, “I am *not* childish. I may be a little stubborn, but that’s it. I care about what’s right, and—”

“She looked like she was about to cry.”

“What I’m saying is—Wait, really?”

“Yeah. Her face was all red, and her lips were quivering.”

“I-I see...”

Kazuya swallowed the words he was about to say and wore a thoughtful look. “Do you think I went too far?” he asked as they resumed walking.

“Maybe I hurt her feelings by calling her a bully.”

“Don’t ask me.” Avril turned away. “You never get mad at me like that even when I annoy you. You just shrink back and act nice. But with Victorique, you don’t hold back. You must be very close.”

Kazuya, pondering about Victorique, gave Avril a hesitant look. “That’s because you’re honest and open. You’re not mean to me.”

Avril was still not convinced.

Soon they arrived at a cemetery on the outskirts of the village, situated in low ground, where entangled branches of dead trees occasionally shook in the damp wind. It was a little cooler here, the air humid, and the area shadowy and chilly.

White crosses were sticking out at an angle from the soft black earth. Kazuya and Avril held hands and slowly stepped through the fence.

“Wh-Which one is it?” Avril asked.

“Just check the epitaphs.”

“R-Right.”

Kazuya and Avril were looking for the graves of outsiders in the village cemetery. Graves of non-villagers who died in the last twenty years. Kazuya thought that if there were any, they had to belong to the ones who died in the clock tower, and might be able to provide clues to the current case.

Kazuya did not really care about the competition, but when he arrived at the village, his earnest nature made him offer this logical suggestion. Avril gladly agreed with him.

They wandered the cemetery, searching for the graves of the clock tower victims. The damp, black dirt stained the tips of their shoes. Avril stopped in front of an old, large grave and began reading the epitaph.

“Let’s see... It’s so old I can’t read it,” she said. “There are a lot of names on it. About twenty of them. Does that mean they were buried together?”

“Five hundred years ago,” said a voice that did not belong to Kazuya.

Avril jumped with a yelp. She turned around and saw a man in his sixties with graying hair. He had a stooped back and dark skin like tanned leather. He was leaning against a large broom stuck in the ground, staring at them.

“Wh-Who are you?”

“That right there is a Protestant grave,” the old man said. “They died together in this village five hundred years ago. We buried them ourselves. So what are you two doing here?”

Kazuya and Avril looked at each other. When they told him that they were looking for the graves of those who died in the clock tower, the gravekeeper laughed.

“You won’t find them here. Sure, there were several deaths in the clock tower, but they were all outsiders. They must have been buried in their

respective hometowns. As far as I know, only villagers are buried here.”

Kazuya and Avril exchanged disappointed glances.

The gravekeeper laughed even harder. “You’re students of that school by the mountains, right? Every summer, you kids wander around in the cemetery with your tests of courage and what not. Now, did you come here to listen to some ghost stories?”

“Not really,” Kazuya said. “Let’s go, Avril. Might be better to check out other places.” He thanked the gravedigger and started walking.

When he made it to the fence, he noticed that Avril was not following him. He turned around, a knot in his gut, and sure enough, Avril was sitting right in front of the Protestants’ grave, listening closely to the gravekeeper’s story.

The wind carried the old man’s voice toward Kazuya.

“It happened about fifty years ago. I was only a child then. My father was a gravekeeper. One night, while I was helping him with his work, staying up late at night in this cemetery, I...”

“You what?” Avril leaned forward.

Kazuya sighed and went back into the cemetery.

“Stay calm now,” the gravekeeper said. “I saw an invisible ghost!”

“Kyaaa! Wait, what do you mean you saw something invisible?”

“Take a look at the soil around here. It’s soft and damp.”

The gravedigger pointed at his feet. Avril gulped as she studied the ground. Before Kazuya could say anything, he noticed Avril’s serious expression and closed his mouth. Heaving a sigh, he sat down next to her.

“I was only a child, but I know what I saw. I will never forget it. An invisible ghost ran through this empty cemetery at night. It was a child. A child about my age.”

“How do you know?”

“By the size of their feet. Footsteps came from over there.” The gravedigger pointed deeper into the cemetery, where thick, dark trees swayed in the breeze. “Then passed by me in an instant. I smelled dirt. There was no one there, but I knew it was an invisible child that had run past me. They left behind their footsteps... Boo!”

Avril let out a shriek and clung to Kazuya.

“Please don’t shout,” Kazuya said. “Your screams are much scarier than the actual stories.”

Kazuya jumped off the Protestant grave.

"I still have another story," the gravekeeper said.

Avril began stomping her feet, eager to hear about it.

"It's almost noon," Kazuya admonished. "Did you already forget why we came here? You're the one who proposed the competition. Just putting it out there, Victorique is incredibly smart. You won't win if you take it easy."

Avril reluctantly jumped off the grave. Kazuya hurried away, while she walked slowly. The soft and damp soil had stained the tips of her shoes an ominous black.

A raven streaked across the sky. It swooped down from over their heads, perched on a white cross, and let out a mournful cry. The cross rocked softly with the raven's movement.

Clouds drifted in, blotting out the sun and blanketing the cemetery in shadows.

Meanwhile, the Princess left behind in St. Marguerite Academy...

Stretching across the campus was a French-style garden, the area close to the school building and dormitories laid out with grass, pebbled pathways, iron benches, and flowerbeds filled with colorful flowers. As one moved further away, the design changed to resemble natural mountains and fields.

There was a small stream, a corner with a handful of trees where the air was damp, and a pleasant gazebo situated atop a sunny incline.

A couple of squirrels were scuttling up and down Victorique de Blois' knees as she was sitting down by the stream. The little critters had mistaken Victorique, deep in thought and completely still, for some doll or statue. Two squirrels stood on her lap and started playing with each other.

Still, Victorique didn't move. Her dress was spread wide around her like a frilly umbrella.

She let out a groan. The squirrels looked at her momentarily, then returned to messing with each other as if nothing happened.

Victorique continued staying still.

After some time, Ms. Cecile came strolling along the pathway, climbing up a small hill and down again, listening to the murmur of the stream, until she came to where the little Victorique was sitting.

“Victorique...?” she called.

Victorique groaned.

“Hmm?”

Ms. Cecile peeked in from behind.

A golden book lay open on Victorique’s lap, from where a tiny man in a mask and robe was staring at her. Victorique, head tilted, was glaring at the masked man, grumbling.

A number of squirrels were frolicking on Victorique’s head, shoulders, back, and small feet, scuttling around then suddenly stopping. Victorique may or may not have noticed them. She was focused solely on the memoir before her.

“What an odd man,” she mumbled.

“Who?” Ms. Cecile asked.

Victorique turned around grumpily. Startled by Ms. Cecile, the squirrels jumped, climbed down Victorique and scurried back into the woods.

“Oh, dear. The squirrels don’t like me,” the teacher said.

“Oh, it’s just you.”

Ms. Cecile handed Victorique something she was holding. A frilly parasol. Victorique just snorted without taking it, so Ms. Cecile opened it and held it over Victorique’s head.

Ms. Cecile looked at Victorique from above, at the golden book on her lap. “What a weird book!” she exclaimed. “What is it?”

“The alchemist’s memoir.”

“Oh, my.”

Victorique scoffed in response.

Ever since Ms. Cecile accepted the task of looking after this Gray Wolf Victorique, she had managed to survive spending time with her without incident, simply because she never expressed any interest in unusual happenings, or even when Victorique was behaving extremely suspiciously or too smart.

And today as well, Ms. Cecile appeared unconcerned about Victorique’s grumpy behavior.

“Quite the mysterious man, huh?” she said. “I used to hear a lot of stories about Leviathan when I was a student here. A weird mask and a robe... What was he hiding under the mask? An eternal mystery now that he’s gone.”

“That one’s easy, Cecile,” Victorique said in a voice that seemed to belong to the elderly.

Ms. Cecile stared at her devilish grin for a while, then chuckled and pinched Victorique’s small, shapely nose.

“Hngh? What are you doing?!”

“Oh, you cheeky, bossy little girl,” Ms. Cecile said in a singsong tone.

“Stop singing!” Victorique snapped. “And get your hands off me. Why is everyone touching me today?!” She stood up and walked away.

“Who touched her?” Ms. Cecile wondered. “Ah, don’t step on the violets!”

Victorique jumped. “Kujou poked my cheek this morning. Then that farting newt pulled my hair in the classroom. And now you pinched my nose!”

“Oh.”

“All you ever do is say ‘Oh, my’ or ‘Hmm’. You don’t actually pay attention to what I say, do you?”

Ms. Cecile trotted up to Victorique, tilting her head, wondering how the girl found out.

When she saw that Victorique was heading somewhere, she called, “Victorique. Where do we start looking?”

“...Look for what?” Victorique asked curiously.

“It’s a competition, right?”

“Are you talking about the farting newt’s suggestion? Was she actually serious?”

“Of course. And I’m serious about it too.”

Victorique gave a tired moan, but Ms. Cecile paid her no mind and pointed to the clock tower in the distance enthusiastically.

“I was thinking, since we’re in the academy...”

“And I can’t go out.”

“Y-Yeah... So why don’t we do a thorough search inside the clock tower? Let’s go.”

“The clock tower?”

Victorique sniffed audibly as she made it off the lawn and onto the pathway. Flowers were blooming radiantly on either side, swaying rhythmically in the dry summer breeze.

Victorique continued walking, her dress bouncing with each step.

“I am indeed trying to solve the mystery of the Leviathan, and my Wellspring of Wisdom tells me that I can do so without ever leaving this academy. Therefore, I have no objection to investigating the clock tower. However...”

“What is it?”

“I can’t examine the clock tower with a scaredy-cat like you around.”

“What?! I-I’m not a scaredy-cat!” Ms. Cecile stammered. “I swear. I’m just easily frightened.”

“That’s exactly the definition of a scaredy-cat, Cecile. You just admitted it yourself.”

Victorique took a ceramic pipe from the pocket of her dress and put it in her cherry lips, but before she could light it, Ms. Cecile snatched it away.

“What are you doing?!” Victorique yelped.

“Smoking is prohibited inside the academy. I’m confiscating this.”

“Give it back, or I’m going to suffer from withdrawal!”

“No, you won’t. I know you’re just pretending to be a grownup, smoking this thing. Watch me put it in my mouth, light it up, and—” She coughed.

“Give it back.”

Victorique took the pipe back from Ms. Cecile, who was having a coughing fit, tears in her eyes. She smoked a few puffs as she neared the clock tower.

Ms. Cecile followed close behind, still coughing and wiping away tears.

There was no longer any sign of Inspector Blois and his detectives in the clock tower.

The huge, old carpenter lumbered across the pathway, carrying his carpentry tools on his back.

The door to the clock tower was blocked with a rope to forbid entry, but both Victorique and Ms. Cecile were able to get in just by bending down a little.

They walked at a leisurely pace, down the humid and darkly-lit hallway. They were a little tense, feeling some strange presence. A sense of vertigo washed over them. It felt as if space itself was distorted, as if their heads were being squeezed tight by some unseen hands.

They found the stairs and climbed up. Victorique took careful steps. Ms. Cecile, on the other hand, in an attempt to quickly ascend the stairs, stumbled and fell all the way down with a shriek.

Victorique paid the teacher no heed. Ms. Cecile quickly followed her.

Victorique stopped by a small window right before the room with the clockworks. Ms. Cecile also studied the window. A shadow zipped past outside, and she screamed.

“Keep it down, Cecile.”

“B-But we’re on the second floor. How could there be someone outside the window? Are they extremely tall? About three meters? There’s no one like that in this school. They must have been floating in the air.”

Victorique left Ms. Cecile alone and reached for the door to the room with the clockworks.

“I believe floating people are commonly referred to as ghosts,” Ms. Cecile said, removing her round glasses with trembling hands.

“Ahuh.” Victorique opened the door.

“Please talk to me! I’m scared!” Ms. Cecile looked around the corridor. “Don’t leave me alone!”

“Scaredy little wimp.”

“I’m not a wimp! I’m a teacher, and that means I’m more dependable than my students, or I wouldn’t be able to guide them.” She followed after Victorique, using the color white and pink as a guide.

The eerie sound of the clockworks echoed low throughout the room.

Round machines, of different sizes but all incredibly huge, were turning slowly, gears meshing with each other. Overhead was a high ceiling shrouded in darkness, from which a pendulum rhythmically swung side to side, cutting through the air, producing a cold, sinister draft that caressed the cheeks.

Victorique and Ms. Cecile looked around the room, at the workshop of the mysterious masked alchemist, who once held the kingdom of Sauville in the palm of his hands.

The ebony table, thick with dust, was still littered with lab equipment. On the wall beyond the table was a bright stained-glass window of unusual design, depicting a garden full of purple and yellow flowers. One red flower bloomed in the middle.

Ms. Cecile had placed her glasses on a nearby old chair. She glanced around, but she couldn't see well, so she reached for her glasses again.

Clink!

The glasses fell off the chair and rolled on the floor without anyone touching them.

Ms. Cecile shuddered, as if a cold hand had seized her heart. She crouched down, picked up her glasses, and looked for Victorique.

But before she could call for the girl, she sensed something unseen strode across the room. The invisible apparition dropped Ms. Cecile's glasses on the floor as it passed in front of her.

The floor creaked, as though someone was walking.

And the door, which should have been closed, opened without a sound.

The unseen had left the workshop.

Ms. Cecile let out a scream.

Victorique jumped. "What's the matter?" she asked in her husky voice.

Ms. Cecile, completely forgetting her role as a teacher, stomped her feet in panic, and with incredible speed, bolted out of the workshop, across the hallway, and tumbled down the stairs.

She thought she passed someone on the stairs, a handsome guy with red hair peeking out of his hat, but she wasn't quite sure.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, she dashed out of the clock tower through the rope, and far, far across the lawn.

Meanwhile...

Kazuya left the cemetery with steady steps and a straight back, and Avril reluctantly followed him. She suggested a number of times to stay a little longer, but Kazuya shook his head firmly.

Breathing a sigh, Avril gave up and left the shadowy, fenced cemetery.

Just then, a young woman was walking toward the cemetery from the village. The bouquet of flowers in her hands indicated she was visiting someone's grave.

The young woman was singing in a slightly alluring voice.

Africans say,

March, march I say!

Till the hens sing!

Till the stars fall from the torn roof!

Du da du da doo...

Even in dreams

March, march I say!

Du da du da doo...

The woman began skipping as she hummed, getting into the song. Even Avril, who was walking next to Kazuya, started rocking her body side to side.

The woman had long, reddish frizzy hair and a voluptuous body. Tall, she looked good in her red dress that matched the color of her hair. And her chiseled, striking features...

“Huh?”

Kazuya stared at the woman. He thought she looked familiar. Noticing his gaze, the woman stopped.

“Oh, Kujou! What are you up to?”

It was the sexy, red-haired dorm mother that Kazuya met every morning in the dormitory cafeteria. She was holding a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other.

“Oh, I see you’re with a girl. Are you on a date, then? In a cemetery?”

“N-No, we’re not. We’re looking into the incident at the clock tower. What about you?”

“My parents are buried here. I come here whenever I feel like it. Oh, hello, gravekeeper. Thanks as always.”

The dorm mother placed the bouquet of flowers on a new grave at the very front of the cemetery. She began mumbling something. Perhaps she was talking to her deceased parents.

Kazuya started walking, but then stopped. “Hey, Avril,” he called. “Have you heard that song before? The one the dorm mother was singing just now?”

Avril cocked her head. “A couple of times, yeah. When I was shopping in the village, the lady at the cash register was singing it. What about you?”

“I heard a man on a wagon singing it while I was walking down the street. Is it a popular song? But you don’t really hear it outside the village. What a weird song!”

“True...”

Kazuya and Avril looked at each other.

“Hmm... I’m pretty sure the word gold appears somewhere in the second or third verse of the song...”

“Really?” Avril cocked her head, then started singing slowly to remember the lyrics.

Pretty sisters, mother, and father!

Flesh and blood is cheap, bread is expensive, but keep on rowing!

Du da du da doo...

Gold and black skin

Row, row I say!

Du da du da doo...

When she finished singing, they glanced at each other. The dorm mother, having finished her mumbling, chimed in with a cigarette in her mouth.

“This song has been around since I was a kid,” she said. “During autumn, we would sing it together while harvesting grapes. You don’t know about it?”

“Not really...”

“My mom told me that there used to be a lot of Africans around, but they all died at once from an epidemic or something. The song was inspired by them. Do you know about it, gravekeeper?”

The old gravekeeper, squatting and pulling weeds, looked up. “Huh?” He looked confused at first, but eventually remembered. “Ah, yes. It’s been so long that I’d forgotten about it. If I recall, that was at the end of 1873.”

“You just said you forgot about it, but that’s an awfully specific date,” Kazuya remarked.

“That’s because something huge happened at the beginning of the next year that I’ll never forget. The old king of Sauville passed away and the young Crown Prince succeeded him as king. The whole kingdom was in mourning for his death, and there were many festivities afterward to celebrate the succession of the new king. The king’s death was so sudden that it created a huge fuss. That’s why I remember the exact year. The former king died in the beginning of 1874, and at the end of the previous year, seven or eight Africans died and were buried there.” The gravedigger pointed to a corner of the cemetery.

Kazuya and Avril looked around and found a large burial mound under the dark shade of tangled dead branches. There was no cross or anything,

just a small hill where the Africans were apparently buried.

“I don’t know how they ended up in the village or why they died,” the gravekeeper said. “Maybe I just forgot... Anyway, all the young Africans died, so we had no choice but to dig a hole and bury them. No proper graves or anything, though.”

“I see...” Kazuya nodded. “It’s a song about those Africans. What does it mean, though?”

“Who knows? I have no idea,” the old man said. “Are you leaving?”

“Ah, yes. Thank you very much.”

Kazuya bowed and was about to leave the cemetery with Avril, when the gravedigger said, “There’s a famous ghost story about the Protestants’ grave as well, but I suppose you’re not interested.”

“No. We’ve got to go... Hey, Avril! Come back! What about your match with Victorique? We’re running out of time!”

Not lending Kazuya an ear, Avril tottered back to the gravedigger, like a moth drawn to a flame.

Back at St. Marguerite Academy’s clock tower...

“C-Cecile?”

Victorique watched as her teacher, screaming out of the blue, dashed out of the room and tumbled down the stairs.

“What’s the matter with you?”

There was no answer.

She heard a man’s surprised grunt from around the stairs.

As the teacher ran past, the man asked if there was something wrong, but she rolled down the stairs, and her scream faded into the distance.

Victorique was left alone in the clockwork room. Blinking repeatedly, she picked up Ms. Cecile’s glasses.

“You forgot your glasses,” she murmured.

As Victorique smoked her pipe, deep in thought, a figure entered through the open door.

Victorique turned around and saw a tall, beautiful man. He was wearing his hat low, and sported fiery-red hair. It was hard to determine his age and nationality. He exuded a somewhat exotic, wild aura.

The moment his green, upturned eyes fell on Victorique, she felt a chill. She slowly retreated a few steps.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“A traveler searching for something,” the man replied in a deep voice, and grinned. His smile, animalistic and ferocious, seemed to split his mouth open all the way to his ears.



“Searching for what?” Victorique backed away some more.

“Something in this academy.”

“There are no lost items here.”

“Oh, but there is.” The man smiled thinly. “*A monstre charmant.*”

His rumbling voice reverberated throughout the room. Beads of sweat formed on Victorique’s forehead, and her fingertips turned cold as a dead man’s. But her expression remained still.

“That red hair,” she mumbled. “I see. You were the one with Grevil earlier.”

“Yeah.” The man gave a small nod. “The oriental man who died here this morning was with me. His name was Wong Kai. Have you heard of him?”

“No.”

Suddenly the man, as if to get rid of the dreadful atmosphere, presented something to Victorique. It was a rolled-up poster. Victorique slowly reached out her hand, took it, and unfolded it.

It was a poster of an oriental man dressed in Western clothing, sporting a long mustache and donning a silk hat. Creepy images adorned it, including a skeleton floating in midair and a gentleman placing his own head on his lap.

The words said: **The Illusion of the Century! Wong Kai’s Great Magic!**

“Wong was a friend of mine,” the man continued. “He was an up-and-coming magician in Saubreme. He really liked the movie The Illusion of the Black Tower. He wanted to see if he could use the setting for his magic trick, so he snuck into the school’s clock tower. Unfortunately, something went wrong.”

The man chuckled. “His death is a huge loss. No point in suspecting me, by the way. Like I told the inspector, I was at the inn at the time he was killed. The innkeeper vouched for me. Unless I was at the inn and at the tower at the same time, I couldn’t have killed him.”

Victorique gave a low groan instead of an answer. She tried to return the poster, but the man shook his head.

“You can keep it.”

“Are you also a magician?” Victorique suddenly asked.

The man's composed façade crumbled, and he looked at Victorique in surprise. "How did you know? Do you know me?"

"I don't."

"Then how?"

Victorique smiled in response, the smile of a cruel old man who had lived for decades. "Because I'm the *monstre*."

The man swallowed.

"A red-haired magician," Victorique said. "If you could be at two places at the same time, then you could have done it. It's one of a magician's tricks, after all. But I won't go into that for now. I know that I'm the one you're looking for. What are you so surprised about? Did you really think that I wouldn't notice? It's true that I can't step out of this academy. But even without going outside, I can guess who you are simply by gathering the dark fragments of chaos floating in the air and reconstructing them."

"There's no way," the man mumbled fearfully.

Victorique sneered. "I know your name, the name of the mysterious partner you've been with for the last ten years, and your purpose."

"You monster!" the red-haired magician spat.

Slowly, Victorique moved, drawing closer to the man. Her face was as ruthless and expressionless as a doll. Her mechanical movement made her seem non-human.

One, two steps...

The clockwork turned and turned. A giant pendulum was swinging idly far above, generating a wind that blew on Victorique's body-length, golden hair. Victorique approached the man. His face contorted as he retreated a little, but fear had paralyzed his body.

The lace at the hem of Victorique's dress would soon reach the man's shoes.

The door slammed open. Victorique and the red-haired man jumped and looked at the door.

There was a huge old man. Standing nearly two meters tall, his features marked him as old, but his body was as solid and muscular as that of a young man.

It was the carpenter. He looked at the two with surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"And who are you?" the red-haired man asked back.

The old man's face turned grim. "I'm the carpenter. Every building in this school is old. Something somewhere always gets damaged because of the elements. So I'm always doing repairs all-year round. We're currently discussing with the school administration whether to renovate this clock tower or tear it down. You're not allowed here without permission. This place is old and crumbling. You don't want it suddenly collapsing on you."

"I see," the red-haired man mumbled with a frown. He then strode out of the workshop.

Victorique was about to leave as well, but suddenly stopped. The large old man eyed her suspiciously, then smiled. He looked like a different person now.

"You look just like my granddaughter," he said. "She's turning seven this year."

"I'm fourteen years old," Victorique huffed.

"Really? You're awfully small for a fourteen-year-old," the old man replied bluntly.

Victorique's face turned crimson. She turned away and was about to leave the room, but then changed her mind and scuttled back to the old man.

"Can you look into something for me?" she asked.

The man chuckled. "A little girl talking like an adult. Oh, don't give me that look. Anyway, it depends. What do you want me to do?"

"I need you to measure the clock tower."

"...Measure the clock tower?" The man looked puzzled. "You mean this clockwork room?"

"No. The whole tower itself. Can you do that?"

"I suppose. It's good to have a blueprint when doing repairs anyway."

"On one condition." Victorique said in a low voice. "You can measure the clock tower itself as much as you want, but do not touch anything in this room. What I want you to measure is outside this room."

"Okay. But why?"

"Because it will anger the alchemist."

"Really? I thought he was no longer around."

"That is correct. But in a way, he still is."

"I see. I don't really get it, but all I have to do is stay away from this room. Got it, little girl."

Regarding Victorique curiously, the old man nodded.

Victorique left the clock tower with Ms. Cecile's glasses in her hand, but instead of returning to the lawn, she circled around the clock tower.

She walked behind the structure, where dead branches twisted like bones, staring at the ground.

There were large footprints under the window—shoe prints much larger than a normal human being's. They must have belonged to someone huge, like the old carpenter.

Victorique studied the footprints for a while. "I see," she mumbled, nodding to herself.

She lifted her head. Dead branches intertwined in sinister patterns. She glimpsed the bright, summer sky beyond.

In the distance, past the flowerbeds, she spotted the old gardener standing. He was a large, muscular man who had been working in the academy for more than twenty years. Victorique looked away.

A small white bird fluttered past.

Victorique breathed a faint sigh.

Meanwhile, in the village cemetery, located in a hollow on the outskirts of the village, an old man's low and grim voice echoed.

Some ravens flew past, while some were perched on the crosses stuck in the dirt at an angle, cawing eerily.

It grew dim, and a chilly breeze whistled past.

"The poor Protestants, buried alive, died one by one under the earth. In the following century, there were countless sightings of the ghost of a young woman covered in mud. Oh, the horror!"

"That's terrifying!" Avril breathed. She had climbed over the Protestants' grave, her long legs dangling in the air.

Even the dorm mother had joined them, sitting down as she listened to the old man's story.

Kazuya had reluctantly stayed, but he was growing impatient.

"I get it," he said. "In short, Avril, you're not a scaredy-cat. That's why you like ghost stories. As proof, Ms. Cecile, the wimpiest person I know, takes off her glasses and runs away screaming once she hears someone telling a ghost story. But you..."

Avril gave Kazuya a perplexed look. Pointing to the square headstone on which her slender waist rested, Kazuya continued.

“You’re sitting boldly on that tombstone while listening to this story. What’s with the look? The Protestants who were buried alive, the very ones that this old man is talking about, are lying right under you. See, you’re not scared.”

Avril still had the same look on her face.

“Ms. Cecile would have fainted,” Kazuya added. He turned to the gravekeeper with a serious look and fixed his posture. “By the way, when were the Protestants massacred?”

“The fifteenth century. So five hundred years ago.” The old man smiled thinly.

A raven flew by. Clouds hung over the sun, turning the cemetery even darker.

“Back in those days, Christians were divided into Catholics and Protestants. Many Protestants were chased all the way to the countryside. Some of our ancestors sheltered them, but pursuers caught up with a family hiding in a house somewhere. They were buried alive here as an example. A horrible thing to do. So horrible,” he repeated.

“That’s why some of the larger houses around here still have hidden rooms that were built in those days,” he continued. “Sometimes children wander into them, causing a commotion. They’re mostly used for storage, but I suppose youngsters also use them as rendezvous spots.”

Avril blushed a little. The matron nodded in understanding.

“Such things happened all over Europe back then. Terrible, to be sure, but it’s all in the past. There were frequent sightings of the muddy young woman in the next century after that, but nowadays no one sees her anymore.”

Noticing Avril’s disappointed look, the old man laughed. “Nothing we can do. It was a long, long time ago. During the time of my great, great, great grandfather. Even ghosts can’t linger around that long.”

The wind blew. The clouds drifted away, revealing the sun. Its blinding light shone on the damp cemetery.

“I’m sure ghosts grow tired too,” the gravekeeper said. “They can’t keep holding grudges forever.”

Leviathan 2

I still remember that time.

I was still much, much younger back then.

I was in a pitch-dark place.

A dark, sealed, stifling place.

Deep in the earth.

The bodies of my brethren were piled up like unwanted objects and covered with dirt. And I was with them. It was hard to breathe. I could not see anything. Deep in the dirt, I regained consciousness and called for God. Then I coughed and desperately called out the names of my brethren, one by one. Only a few responded with faint moans.

It took me a long time to dig my way out of the dirt. When I finally emerged, it was dark outside. The faint moonlight illuminated my mud-covered face.

At that moment, I felt it.

There was no God.

I could no longer feel the God I had believed in and worshiped devoutly. It was clear that I had been revived in hell. I was still very young back then. Too young to lose God. As I was digging my way through the dirt, my brethren perished, and I, the only one who had risen, had nothing left to believe in.

We prayed as we were buried. But God did not save us.

I looked around and found myself in a small cemetery. The cemetery of the village we stayed in. Several white crosses were stuck into the ground at an angle. We were buried. Buried alive. Why? Everyone died. Why?

One thing was certain: if I was found, I would be killed and returned to this cemetery.

So I left God there with the remains of my brethren, and ran.

Ran through the cemetery.

My body felt oddly light.

Was I still alive? Or was I already dead?

I did not know what was what anymore. I had left everything I knew in that grave. In my heart, I swore. Swore firmly, that I would become immortal and take my revenge. On this kingdom. On those who killed me. I would exact my vengeance in the most unholy way possible.

It had been a long time since then.

How time had passed.

My memory was hazy.

My soul had been wandering ever since.

If I should ever die in the future...

My soul would continue to wander.

In the clock tower.

For eternity.

Chapter 4: Mean Frills and the Farting Newt

Noon was nearing, and the blinding sun cast its bright rays on the French-style garden sprawling across the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy, shining on the verdant lawns, well-kept flowerbeds, the pathways paved with white stones.

Cold water flowing from the crystal fountain glistened under the summer sky.

After returning from the village, Kazuya and Avril walked along the pathway and stopped in front of the fountain.

Avril held her hand over the cold water. “So refreshing!” she exclaimed. “Really? Me too, then...”

Kazuya placed the bag he was holding—a sandwich for lunch that he bought from the village bakery—on the edge of the fountain and touched the water. The coolness permeated into his warm body.

Feels nice, he thought.

Avril suddenly scooped up water with both her hands and poured it over Kujou.

Kazuya yelped in surprise. He then grabbed his bagged lunch and ran away. Avril chased after him, laughing merrily.

It was a fun moment, like it was summer break already.

Kazuya was running along the pathway when he spotted a mass of white frills on the grass on a hillside. He picked up his speed.

“Kujou? What’s wrong?” Avril wondered as she watched Kazuya recede further and further away.

Kazuya kept running toward the colors white and pink at immense speed. He left the pathway, weaved past the benches, and stopped abruptly before the lawn.

“Hey, Victorique,” Kazuya called.

Victorique was wearing an organdy dress, enamel shoes, and she was holding a pretty parasol now. Her stunning golden hair hung down over the grass. Her pale emerald eyes were narrowed irritably.

“Victorique?”

“...”

“Hello?”

“...”

“I know you can hear me. Here, I got you something.”

“...What would that be?” Victorique furrowed her brows and twirled her parasol. “Let me guess. Another weird hat or a skull.”

“Excuse me. It’s a sandwich. I got grilled chicken, asparagus, cold ham and purple onions. And some sweet stuff that you like. Lingonberry jam, raspberry jam, and also...”

Victorique turned around with a smile and extended her small hand. Kazuya handed her the whole bag. She then rummaged through the sandwiches, tossing the ones she didn’t like onto the grass. Kazuya picked them back up and returned them inside the bag.

Eventually, Victorique picked one of the sandwiches, sniffed it, and looked very delighted.

“I’m glad there’s something you like,” Kazuya said. “Let’s see... Oh, you like raspberry jam, huh? Avril seems to like it too. You should eat it quickly before she gets it.”

Victorique’s eyes widened. She immediately took a bite out of the sandwich.

Munch. Munch.

She chewed as much as she could.

Kazuya watched her with a smile.

The wind blew, twirling Victorique’s parasol. Her golden hair billowed like a living creature, then slowly settled back down.

Munch. Munch.

Victorique continued eating the raspberry jam sandwich.

“Haa... haa... Kujou’s... got so much stamina,” Avril muttered. “Does he jog every day or something? Maybe he runs up hills or some stairs.”

Avril, breathing hard, finally caught up to Kazuya.

He had completely forgotten about her, and was talking to a white mass of frills.

“Who is he talking to?” she wondered. “Wait, that fluffy white thing... must be Victorique.”

Avril quietly approached them.

Victorique gave curt replies. Her muffled voice suggested she was eating.

“There’s a Protestants’ grave in the cemetery,” Kazuya said, “and the old man shared a story about an invisible ghost. Also, houses in the village have lots of hidden rooms to hide the Protestants. Oh, by the way, do you know this song?”

Much to Avril’s surprise, Kazuya started singing.

**Africans say,
March, march I say!
Till the hens sing!
Till the stars fall from the torn roof!
Du da du da doo...
Even in dreams
March, march I say!
Du da du da doo...**

Enthused, he repeated the last part over and over again. He seemed to be having a lot of fun.

What is he doing? This is a competition. Why is he sharing all the intel we gathered to the enemy?! And he’s singing!

Avril sat down next to them with her lips pursed.

Kazuya glanced at her. “Oh, Avril. Why the long face?”

Before she could reply, the mass of frills muttered in her husky voice, “The farting newt has returned.”

“What did you say?! Wait, my raspberry jam sandwich! Why’s this frill eating it?!”

“She has a name, and it’s Victorique,” Kazuya said. “And Victorique, her name’s Avril, not farting newt. What’s wrong with you two? You just met, and all you do is fight, calling each other names. Here you go, Avril.”

Kazuya gave Avril her second favorite flavor, lingonberry jam sandwich. Without any other choice, she started eating it.

“Why are you telling her everything when this is supposed to be a competition?” Avril grumbled.

“Huh? Uh, I just thought it would be better if we exchanged intel. Did I mess up?”

“No, it’s fine. But anyway, you were furious earlier. Did you already forget?”

“Furious? Who, me?” Kazuya looked perplexed.

Avril was deeply shocked by his reaction. “You two had a huge fight earlier. I was worried and all...” She glanced at Victorique, asking for backup, but she just looked away and gave a small shrug, as if saying, ‘It’s nothing new.’

Kazuya regarded Avril curiously. Then, he spotted a pair of large round glasses lying next to Victorique and picked it up.

“Are these Ms. Cecile’s glasses?” he asked.

“Ahuh,” Victorique replied coolly. “We were in the clock tower, and she suddenly screamed and ran away. She left her glasses behind for some reason. I don’t know where she went. I really don’t get that woman.”

“Ah, I see.”

Kazuya nodded. Once when he entered an abandoned warehouse with Ms. Cecile, a strange voice surprised her, and she removed her glasses and took off at full speed.

“She probably can’t see well right now,” he said.

“That’s none of my business,” Victorique replied.

“Of course not. I’ll look for her, then. You wait here.” Kazuya stood up, glasses in hand.

Victorique let out a surprised grunt. She wanted to say something, but Kazuya, not noticing, left.

“W-Wait, Kujou...” Victorique murmured. “Don’t... go...!”

Avril, chewing on her sandwich with a frown, began stealing glances at Victorique.

For a while, Victorique just watched Kazuya go.

Then she spun around, turning her back to Avril, and used the parasol as a shield. Actually, it was more like she crawled into the parasol. Silence descended. She looked like a hare trying its best to hide in the presence of a predator.

Avril watched the parasol, confused. She then stood up and circled around in front of Victorique.

Victorique looked up, and yelped at the sight of Avril. She spun around again, but Avril followed her. After repeating this a few times, Avril became annoyed.

“Why are you avoiding me? What a rude girl.”

“...”

“Look at me. Your classmate’s over here.”

“...”

There was no reply.

For a while Avril was irritated, but when she noticed the parasol quivering, she became worried.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Avril peered in from above. Victorique’s supposedly rosy cheeks were as pale as this morning when she entered the classroom. Her lips were trembling, her eyelashes quivering. She seemed frightened.

“S-Sorry,” Avril said. “But what’s the matter?”

“Get away from me, you farting newt!”

“What?! I’m trying to be nice here, and you’re just being rude. Look at me!”

“No! Go away!”

“No. You go!”

Avril thought Victorique would not give in, but after a moment’s hesitation, she stood up. Holding a parasol in one hand and a golden book in the other, she walked away.

“You’re not going anywhere!” Avril stomped on the hem of Victorique’s dress.

Victorique tumbled. The golden book rolled across the grass. Her dress flipped, and her dark pink drawers with its rose-patterned embroidery billowed softly in the air.

Victorique was lying flat on the ground, not moving a muscle. Her parasol was blown away by the wind.

Avril dashed across the lawn, leapt high, and caught the parasol before it could fly away. She then ran back with the nimble strides of a doe, and begrudgingly returned the parasol to Victorique.

Victorique slowly got up and held her forehead with her little palms, moaning in pain.

“Let me see!” Avril said, peering into her face. Victorique resisted, but Avril grabbed her hands and pulled them away from her face.

“I don’t see anything,” she said. “You’re overreacting.”

Victorique groaned.

“I’m sorry, anyway. Here’s your parasol.”

Victorique quietly took the parasol from her.

Avril frowned. “But you’re not very nice. Why do you hate me so much?”

There was no answer, so she grabbed her hand, but quickly let go.

Victorique’s small, fair hands were surprisingly cold. Her face was growing paler by the minute, and her green eyes, staring nervously at Avril, were quivering.

“Wait... you’re not mad. You’re nervous?”

“...”

“So that’s what’s going on. But why? You’ve never met a girl your age before?”

“...”

“Hmm? What did you say?”

“No!” Victorique snapped, glaring at Avril with a red face.

“Why not?”

“...”

“Okay, whatever. You’re a Gray Wolf, after all. You must have your reasons. So you were just shy, huh?”

Avril chuckled. She sat down on the grass, throwing out her slender legs. Victorique stared at her as if she were looking at something peculiar.

“In that case, we should get to know each other more. Nice to meet you. My name is Avril Bradley, an international student from England. My beloved grandfather was an adventurer, so I want to be an adventurer too.”

“I know,” Victorique murmured timidly.

“You do?”

“Kujou tells me all sorts of things about the outside. The village flea market overflowing with goods, the quiet Sunday church, the small newly-built movie theater. Your name often comes up in his stories. You’re always having fun, going wherever you want.”

Victorique's voice sounded gloomy. Worried, Avril looked into her small face, but she looked away.

Her small figure, clothed in a luxurious dress, and perfect features made her seem like a porcelain doll. Her mysterious, melancholic, husky voice sounded like a terrifying cacophony, making Avril uneasy.

Avril tried to sound as cheerful as possible to drown out the noise. "How about we talk about the alchemist?"

"Sure," Victorique answered curtly.

"Wanna hear my deduction? The alchemist's ghost still wanders the clock tower and is killing people. He doesn't like strangers visiting the clock tower. That's why—"

"So you're dumb," Victorique scoffed.

"Wh-What did you call me?!" Avril was seething.

"You're Kujou's friend, all right. Just the right amount of stupid. Be more logical. There is no such thing as ghosts. Wake up."

"So the culprit's not a ghost? In that case, maybe the alchemist is still alive like Kujou said. It's been twenty years, and his body was never found. He's been hiding somewhere in the clock tower, stealing our food."

"The alchemist is long dead," Victorique snorted.

She turned away and started rummaging through the bakery bag. She took the ham sandwich, but before she could bite into it, Avril snatched it away and stood up.

Victorique looked at Avril, astonished. She rose to her feet and reached for the sandwich. But no matter how much she stretched out her hand, she could not overcome the twenty-centimeter difference in their heights.

"Explain it," Avril said smugly.

"K-Kujou wouldn't do that."

"Because Kujou is nice. But I'm not. Now spit it out!"

"You farting newt!"

"Leviathan the Alchemist was a real magician. I'm sure of it. He wore a mask and a robe to hide the fact that he's been living for centuries. Anyone would be horrified if they saw an unaging body."

Victorique's eyes narrowed. "That's impossible. You really *are* dumb."

"Wh-Why you! Then why was he wearing a mask and a robe? If he had another reason, tell me. Come on." She lowered the sandwich little by little.

Staring at the food, Victorique hesitantly said, “You’re right in that he was trying to hide his true identity.”

“I knew it. He was immortal—”

“He wasn’t. Let’s say you put on a mask, a robe and gloves. You wouldn’t be able to recognize yourself, would you?”

“No...”

Avril lowered the sandwich. Victorique took it, sat down on the grass, and munched on it. She chewed and swallowed.

“Listen closely, farting newt,” she continued. “Let’s say, for example, you want to hide your gender. A mask and robe would do just that.”

“So Leviathan was a woman?”

“You’re not too far off the mark. I’d say it’s much closer than your immortality theory.”

“A-A woman,” Avril mumbled, not entirely convinced. “I think the Leviathan in the Bible was female, but still...”

Victorique was happily gobbling up her sandwich. The bread passed through pearly teeth and disappeared rapidly inside her mouth.

Avril was deep in thought for a moment, her mouth hanging open, but eventually snapped back to reality.

“But what about that story where he turned a white rose into a blue one? A lot of people witnessed it. His real identity aside, this story really happened.”

“It was a trick,” Victorique said flatly.

Avril was silent for a while. Then, suddenly, she flared up. “That can’t be!” she shouted, hands on her hips.

Victorique jumped, startled by her loud voice. She turned her gaze to Avril, blinking repeatedly.

“What is it this time?”

“You’re wrong. It was magic. It was incredible, okay? Frilly witch!”

“Frilly witch? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know! Just consider it an insult! How about that, huh?!”

Victorique stared blankly at Avril, then frowned. “Let me prove it to you, then.”

“...Prove what?”

“Go find me a white rose. I will do what he did in front of you. Then you can take all the time in the world to reflect on how stupid you were and

die of shame. Get moving!”

Avril stomped her feet in frustration, but seconds later, she begrudgingly headed for the flowerbeds.

The sun grew more and more intense. The lawn was blinding.

Avril found a white rose from among the many flowerbeds on the campus. She picked it, making sure that the gardener wasn't around, and returned to the lawn.

Victorique had also gone somewhere, but she came back around the same time as Avril.

Victorique took the white rose from Avril and gripped it tight.

“Are you going to recite an incantation or something?” Avril asked.

“Be quiet, newt,” Victorique huffed.

“What?!”

Victorique, clutching the rose in one hand, began eating the rest of her sandwich with her other hand.

Munch, munch.

Swallow.

Munch, munch.

Swallow.

Munch, munch.

Avril watched the rose with bated breath.

A while later, the white rose gradually turned blue. Avril gasped. The change in color started from the base of the petals, and after a few minutes the white rose turned into a bright blue rose.

Avril gasped, bringing both hands over her mouth.

Victorique casually continued eating her sandwich.

“How did you do it?” Avril asked.

Victorique raised her head. “I’m a Gray Wolf,” she said offhandedly. “I can do a lot of things.”

“What?”

“I can fly, become invisible, and change the color of roses from white to blue.”

“...”

“That’s right. I’m a monster.”

“Won’t you tell me the truth?”

Victorique cocked her head and thought about it for a moment.

Then she shook her head. "No."

"Why not?!"

"Because."

"Y-You're messing with me! You know I want to know, but you won't tell me. Besides, I've never heard of such an ability before from Gray Wolves. They're supposed to be smart strategists who could bring glory or peril to a country. They don't fly, turn invisible, or change the color of roses. I know these things. So tell me the truth, mean frill!"

Avril had her fists clenched for a bit, shaking, then out of nowhere, she lunged at Victorique, who was eating her sandwich nonchalantly.

"What are you doing, you barbarian?!"

"Yeah, that's right. My ancestors were Vikings! That's what my grandfather used to say!"

"Ow! You're hurting me!"

Avril bit down on her slender arm, and Victorique's tight grip on the rose loosened. She flailed about, letting out a mournful cry. The ruffles and laces of her dress danced in the air.

Avril grabbed Victorique's wrist and looked into her palm. A piece of cotton soaked in blue ink rolled out. She picked it up and studied it carefully.

"What's this?" she finally asked.

"..."

"I'm gonna bite you again!"

Victorique gave a jerk. "You let the stem suck in the ink," she reluctantly said. "Then the white rose will be dyed the same color as the ink. It's a simple trick."

"Oh..."

Avril sank down on the grass, dejected. Victorique rubbed her arm sadly and slowly moved away from her.

Avril heaved a deep sigh. "A huge moment in Sauville's history was actually that simple?"

"People readily believe the lies they want to believe. Back then, the king of Sauville needed wealth for the kingdom. The young and lonely queen was looking for a man with special powers to protect her. There were people who wanted to believe in the lie that was a mysterious and powerful

alchemist. Had the royal family been satisfied with what they had, they would not have been fooled. That's all there is to it."

Clouds drifted across the sky, covering the sun a little. The sunlight grew softer, and the grass turned a little darker.

"It was all a trick," Victorique continued in her husky voice. "Like the blue rose, his production of gold in his workshop, his disappearance after being riddled by poisoned arrows, all employed some sort of trickery. I'm certain of it. That's what I'm trying to figure out."

A red-haired man wearing a hat low passed by the pathway in the distance. Sensing a sinister atmosphere, Avril shuddered.

Victorique took out the poster she received from the red-haired man.

The Illusion of the Century! Wong Kai's Great Magic!

Depicting a headless man and a beautiful woman floating in the air, the poster was for a large-scale magic show that had been extremely popular in Saubreme in the past few years.

"Leviathan was a magician who was born too early. If he were around today, he would probably be very popular. After all, he managed to deceive the king and queen and participated in the kingdom's politics. No other magician has done what he did. In that sense, he was a splendid blockhead. He influenced history through his lies." Victorique paused. "He must have lived a life that was anything but boring," she muttered in a peculiar tone. "He was, after all, one of those people. But I doubt he ever knew peace."

The wind blew again, and the clouds drifted away, revealing the sun. Dazzling sunlight returned to the lawn, illuminating Avril's short, blonde hair as she hung her head low.

Avril sighed. She took off her leather shoes and white socks and rose to her feet.

Walking barefoot on the grass, she mumbled, "I see."

Avril turned around and saw Victorique standing up as well. She walked toward the small stream and dunked her feet in the water, one at a time.

Clear, gentle-flowing water enveloped Avril's pearly feet. Tiny fish swam around the gravel and aquatic plants.

"You're amazing, Victorique," she said, enjoying the coolness of the water. "I haven't really thought about it before, but maybe I'm a little dumb. What do you think?"

There was no reply.

Avril lifted her pleated skirt and strolled along the stream. Her long, radiant legs glistened white in the summer sun.

“I mean, look at me,” she went on. “Since Kujou spends a lot of time with you, maybe he sees me as a dumb girl. What I’m trying to say is...” She fidgeted for a bit. “I know this sounds lame, b-but I’m gonna say it anyway. D-Don’t take Kujou away from me. Wait, nooooo! Forget I said that! Aaaah! I didn’t say anything... Huh? Victorique?”

Avril let go of her skirt and looked around.

She was alone. When she climbed out of the stream and surveyed her surroundings, she saw Victorique’s small, fluffy figure already trotting away in the distance.

“Sh-She didn’t hear what I said, did she?”

Avril’s head dropped. She sat down on the grass, throwing her wet legs out, and groaned. For a while she was crestfallen, but eventually she pulled herself together.

“Now I’m hungry!”

She picked up the bakery bag lying nearby. She took out a chicken sandwich and started eating heartily.

Ms. Cecile, hidden among the flowers in a small flowerbed across the stream, was watching Avril closely.

She was sitting down, hugging her knees, cupping her ear toward the direction of the lawn. She was clearly eavesdropping.

“Wh-What was that just now?” she said, shocked. “I didn’t mean to listen to any of that, but wow!”

Leviathan 3

My honor, if I may say so, lasted only two years after the night I created the blue rose in the royal palace.

During those two years, the queen took me with her wherever she went, and with the masked alchemist behind her, she threatened the nobles who refused to accept her. The aristocrats gradually came to believe that they had to please the queen or there would be terrible consequences. She began to reign over high society like an empress.

Meanwhile, I tried to reign in politics. I attended and spoke at every meeting on colonial policy. Many of the top brass disliked my presence, while the king seemed to take a neutral stance.

Then one night...

I entered the queen's room to find Baron Musgrave there. The Minister of Justice. The man who had called me a fraud. He was whispering something to the queen, and she turned pale.

Baron Musgrave had told her to keep me away from her. If she kept this up, the king would send her away along with the alchemist.

From that night on, the queen no longer called me to her side. I asked her why, but she would not tell me.

And then several days later, I was summoned to a certain place.

A courtroom.

Baron Musgrave, the Minister of Justice himself, had initiated an unprecedented hearing. He and the king were present.

The validity of alchemy itself was put on trial. Using records and historical facts from all times and places, a scholar from the Ministry of Occult asserted that alchemy was real, while a scholar from the Academy of Science insisted that there was no evidence.

I listened in disgust and anger.

It was a showdown between ancient knowledge and science. A losing battle for the occult, which had been losing support in recent times.

I could not listen. I fell silent, my fists shaking.

The baron stood up. He pointed straight at me, and said, “Leviathan! You have lost.”

I snickered. “How?”

He clapped his hands ceremoniously. “But I will give you a chance. Create gold right here, right now, in front of our eyes. You must abandon your secretive methods and reveal the manufacturing process. This is an order from the king.”

The baron turned around and exchanged looks with the king. I knew exactly what that gesture meant.

“I see what is happening,” I said. “You are afraid of my power, but you want gold. You wish to ruin me, corner me, so that you can perform alchemy with your own hands.”

“No. I do not believe in alchemy. Why would I? I simply want to prove that it’s not real.”

“But what about the king?” I sneered, and the king’s face twisted.

Baron Musgrave raised his hands toward the king in protest. “Your Majesty, it’s all a trick. If we don’t get rid of this monster now, Sauville will fall into ruin!”

“It is no use, Baron. The king wants gold.”

Baron Musgrave was speechless. He tried to jump me, but I dodged, laughing.

“Leviathan,” the king called in a quiet voice.

I turned around. The king was staring at me, wearing the same expression that he had in the corridor two years ago. A mix of suspicion and fear.

“Take off your mask and robe,” he said.

“What?”

“I’ve always wanted to see your real face. I spent sleepless nights, curious. Are you a demon? Or are you a human being? Are you even alive? Thanks to you, our finances are stable. Yet I could not help but think: What if we entered into a contract with a terrifying entity?”

I swallowed, took several steps back.

The king never took his eyes off me. “I cannot sleep at night...”

“S-Stop!”

“When I doze off, I dream of that mask.”

“Stay back!”

“In your dreams, you remove your mask. One night your face was that of a rotting dead crawling with maggots. Another night, you had the face of a beautiful young man. But another night it was that of a terrifying woman’s, twisted in resentment. But I have a feeling that none of the faces I have seen in my dreams belong to you.”

“No...”

“I cannot sleep at night, masked one. Enigmatic alchemist!”

For the first time, I felt fear.

Baron Musgrave watched us curiously, at how the tables had turned.

The king did not back down. “Leviathan, please take off that mask!” he insisted.

“I refuse!”

I turned on my heel and fled.

That night, a verdict was handed down.

The court had ruled that alchemy was not real.

I became a nobody. I asked to see the beautiful and sweet queen, but I was never allowed to see her again.

Alchemy does not exist. Then I am no longer an alchemist; only a mysterious man in a mask.

After losing everything in just one day, I returned to the village alone. As the train rocked my body, rage and bitterness filled my heart.

I was so close. I never anticipated an obstacle.

Baron Musgrave...

It was his fault. He called me a fraud and ended me.

By the time I arrived in the village, I had nothing but vengeance burning in my heart.

I returned to the clock tower and was about to spend the night doing experiments when someone came to visit me. When I went outside, I saw a luxurious carriage parked outside.

“The Queen?”

I had a glimmer of hope. Her face flashed through my mind.

But it was someone else who jumped down from the carriage. A boy of only 15 or 16 years old. The same boy whom I met in this same tower two years ago.

Ian de Musgrave, the eldest son of the cursed Baron Musgrave. His short hair had grown long, and his once effeminate body had grown considerably. He looked more like an adult now.

Ian, looking as innocent and happy as ever, asked me, “What are you doing now?”

“Living my life in seclusion,” I replied.

“What a waste! How in the world did this happen?”

Did he not know what his father had done? Or did he just not care?

“I couldn’t come here because my father insists I stay away. But he seemed busy today, so he couldn’t keep an eye on me the whole time. I threatened my attendant. Am I bothering you?”

“No.” I shook my head.

Two years had passed since that day, and Ian was still as curious about alchemy as ever. Without a shred of caution, he said, “Please teach me alchemy. I’d like to know all about it.”

“Very well.”

I led Ian and his attendant into the clock tower’s clockwork room.

Four huge mechanisms and a pendulum were moving slowly that night. Lab equipment lay scattered on the ebony table.

I ordered his attendant to check carefully that there was no gold anywhere in the workshop, just as Baron Musgrave had done two years ago.

When they were done, I sent them out into the hallway. Then I locked myself in the workshop alone with Ian.

Ian, who had no idea what was going on, looked happy. He was enthusiastic as he talked to me about all sorts of things.

Three hours passed.

The boy’s agonized cry—the most horrifying scream that anyone had ever heard in their entire life—rang out from the workshop.

Startled, the attendant kicked down the door and tumbled inside.

“What did you do?!”

In the clockwork room, huge mechanisms spun eerily. A pendulum was swinging idly high above, the breeze it produced flapping my robe.

In the middle of the workshop stood a masked and robed alchemist—me. Alone.

Ian de Musgrave was lying at my feet.

His pretty face was distorted with fear and pain to the point that he was completely unrecognizable. Clumps of gold glittered around his open mouth.

A large golden flower had blossomed, ripping through his white belly.

Splashes of gold broke through Ian's belly from the inside, mixing with his internal organs, flesh, skin. It spilled out of the gaping hole in his stomach like a blooming flower.

Warm gold mingling with fountaining blood gushed out of the hole.

The attendant lunged at me. "Bastard! What have you done to the young master?!"

"I made him drink molten gold," I replied coolly. "The gold went down his throat and into his stomach, and the high heat ruptured his belly. The shock killed him."

"Y-You monster!" The attendant, trembling with rage, pointed at my mask. "Don't even think you can get away with this. This is murder. An unknown commoner killed the son of a noble!"

"I am well aware of that."

"Bastard!"

"Tell Baron Musgrave: can he prove it in court?"

The attendant looked stunned.

The giant mechanisms whirred endlessly.

I snickered. The pendulum swung slowly, creating a dry breeze that fluttered my robe.

"Do you understand what I am saying? Baron Musgrave has just proven tonight, on his own authority, in the court of Sauville, that alchemy is not real. And just a few moments ago, you confirmed that there was no gold anywhere in this workshop. But when you opened the door, Ian was dead, having drunk gold. If alchemy was not real, where did the gold come from?"

The attendant fell on his knees and covered his face with both hands.

I guffawed. My shrill laughter echoed up to the high ceiling, at the swinging pendulum, at the abyss. My voice rose endlessly.

"None can pass judgment on me. None!" I bellowed.

From that day on, the clock tower was surrounded and monitored by the Royal Knights. Unable to step out of the clock tower, I immersed myself in

my experiments.

Since the night I killed Ian, his ghost had been haunting me. The boy with the golden flower on his belly had been following me, standing in one corner, in the corridor, at the top of the stairs. Ian was always by my side, looking at me sadly as I spent my days experimenting.

Ian was faultless.

I had killed an innocent boy who idolized me.

I felt nothing but anger and humiliation that night, but remorse consumed me every night after.

An eerie darkness began to shroud the clock tower. For some reason, the surrounding beech trees started dying, covered in dark cobwebs that seemed like garments for the dead.

Did the students of the academy sense the ominous atmosphere surrounding the clock tower? I did not know. All the students here were odd children who did not speak a word, and moved as if they were mechanical contraptions. I had no idea who they were or what they were being taught.

Then one day...

I was huddled in the clockwork room as usual, spending all day doing experiments, when I heard footsteps approaching. No visitors came to this place. Perhaps it was the boy's ghost wandering around. I kept my eyes on the ebony table.

My ears caught the sound of heels.

Then I saw a pair of fine but worn boots.

The ghost stood still beside me, waiting. Wearily, I lifted my head.

A young man was standing there like a ghost in the darkly-lit workshop.

I could not see his face, backlit by the orange glow of the wall lamp. When he moved his body, the light from the lamp shifted and his face became visible.

"...Ian."

The familiar ghost made me rise from my chair. He took a step back, surprised. Then he tilted his head and looked up at me curiously.

It was not Ian.

I was out of my mind. The young man was a little older than Ian. Being holed in the tower, with only a ghost as my company, must have driven me to insanity. The young man, however, looked somewhat similar to Ian.

Perhaps it was the casual manner in which he carried himself, and his aristocratic grace. Ian was genteel but unpretentious for a noble.

I took a closer look at the young man.

His soft hair, tied back sloppily, cascaded down his back like a young horse's tail. His face was pale, and there was a sorrowful glint in his eyes. He must have been 18 or 19 years old. Despite his aristocratic features, he was dressed in plain clothing of a faded shirt and slim pants.

"Nice to meet you," he said. "My name is Albert."

From the moment I met Albert, I knew there was something wrong with him. I could tell from the look in his eyes that there was something sinister lurking beneath his serene and handsome features. He appeared possessed by something otherworldly.

Albert was an official of the Ministry of the Occult.

"I came here to protect you," he said.

"Protect me, you say? From what?"

"From the king, of course." Albert grinned.

"...From the king?"

"Yes."

Although he had been wearing a serious expression ever since he entered the workshop, I suddenly had the feeling that he was just fooling around.

To him, everything was a game, like he was playing God's dice.

I did not know why that thought occurred to me.

"At this rate, you will be eliminated by the king," he said glumly. "He's afraid of your power, and the realist old men, including Baron Musgrave, are desperate to have you killed. Besides, the Ministry of the Occult is not willing to help you, as that would mean opposing the king."

"Yes..."

"But I am willing to lend you a hand. My help doesn't come free, of course."

"I see. So you want gold as well."

Albert chuckled. "Nothing so tacky." He brushed his hair wearily. "I simply wish to prepare for a storm."

"A storm, you say?"

“Yes. Have you sensed it yet, Leviathan? Or were you too focused on colonial policies that you failed to notice?”

“I give up. What on earth are you talking about?”

“There is a storm coming, the likes of which the world has never seen before.”

Albert’s voice dropped low. The forlorn smile on his face was gone, replaced by a look of terrible, dark passion. His eyes, wide open, seemed to be staring into the void. Like a soothsayer, he held out his hands with a sad expression on his face, then spoke.

“The king has not yet noticed. He lacks foresight.”

“What is this storm you are talking about?”

“A Great War.”

I laughed. “A war? There’s always been a war somewhere in the European continent since the era before Christ. History is marked with either wars or pestilence. So, where will this war break out?”

“Nowhere. And everywhere.” Albert’s low and eerie voice echoed throughout the workshop. “Hear me out. The incoming storm will not be isolated to one area. It won’t be countries fighting over territories or grudges. In the next few years, a storm of an unprecedented scale will sweep over the lands. I know it. When that time comes, nations from all over the world will form alliances, fight, and then join forces again. For years, the world will be engulfed in ghoulish madness. A Great War. Do you understand? It’s Sodom. It’s a banquet of insanity. No one can stop it, and no one will be able to figure out how it started, or why. Fire and wind will blanket the world. Every city, every sea, will become a battleground, countless soldiers will bleed, and nations will fall.”

“...”

“I don’t know when it will come or how the destruction will begin. I can’t see that far into the future. It is painful, Leviathan. After that storm, everything will change. The world will adopt new rules, new ways of life, and Europe, the center of the world, will become an old piece of junk. This place will be decimated, and when that happens, all that we believe in, the knowledge that Europe has cherished throughout its long history, will disappear. Mystic arts will be reduced to superstition. The world will slip away somewhere we do not yet know. I find that terrifying. That is why we must prepare for battle, Leviathan.”

“Sauville is a small kingdom,” he muttered sadly. “We must protect it by any means necessary. But the king doesn’t understand that. Neither does my father.”

I shuddered at the sound of his manic voice. My gut told me that this soft-spoken young man was crazy. Yet I also felt that there was some truth to his vision of the future. Perhaps he could foresee a dark future *because* he was crazy.

In my mind I saw a world mired in madness, a storm of unprecedented magnitude, a world war that had not yet happened. Soldiers bleeding, vehicles that looked like lumps of iron I had never seen before, the dull sound of propellers emitted by bombers streaking through the sky.

After talking about the future like some fortune-teller, Albert cast his eyes down. Then he laid his hand on my knee, and whispered, “I need your help. In return, I will do everything in my power to protect you. I have limited power while my father is still alive, but...”

“You need my help? For a war that might not even happen?”

“Yes. There is something we need.”

“You want gold too,” I said tiredly.

“Of course not!” he spat. “I don’t need gold. That’s not what I want from you. I want absolute power!” Albert regarded me with wide, crazed eyes.

“Leviathan, you’re the only one who can create it. It will become Sauville’s trump card in facing the storm. What lies beneath that enigmatic mask will save the European continent from battle and from desolation. I beg you. Please lend me your strength.”

“What would you have me create?”

Albert’s thin lips twisted into a grin. “I want you to create...”

And then he uttered the name of the thing he wanted me to create.

Something accursed.

A bizarre entity that most defied the laws of nature.

“Homunculi!”

Chapter 5: Farewell, Fiend

On the campus of St. Marguerite Academy, the lush green lawns and gorgeous flowerbeds glowed vividly under the sky. The summer sun shone on the water cascading from the crystal fountain and on the pathways paved with white stones.

In the middle of the colorful flowerbeds, near the relaxing stream, Ms. Cecile was mumbling to herself.

“I-I wasn’t expecting that. Don’t take Kujou away from me? He’s a nice boy, I suppose. Well-mannered, kind-hearted, and somewhat amusing. But...”

The sun was slowly going down. In the distance, Inspector Blois, his golden drill-shaped hair fixed properly this time, was walking along the pathway, with his subordinates—holding hands, as usual—following him. Victorique was already gone. Avril, disheartened, was tottering toward the school building.

Ms. Cecile stood up. She wore no glasses as she had left them in the clock tower earlier. Her drooping brown eyes looked larger and more moist than usual. A gust almost knocked her into the flowerbed, but she managed to stay on her feet. She sighed in relief.

Suddenly she clapped her hands, and her face lit up.

“Let’s get this straight,” she said.

She crouched down, picked up a twig, and scratched a diagram on the ground. At the corners of a triangle, she wrote V, K, and A.

“First, Avril actually likes Kujou. Since when did she start liking him? When she first transferred, I think she was chasing around Kujou because she liked the supernatural, and he was a mysterious oriental called the Reaper. When did that turn into love? I didn’t notice at all. Well, let’s leave that aside for now. What about Kujou? I have no idea. He looks earnest... Oh, I think he mentioned he liked blondes! Or wait, I think he said his favorite color was gold. Oh well, whatever. Anyway, that means... Wait, Avril and Victorique both have blonde hair. Now what?”

Ms. Cecile cocked her head. She added arrows.

“Whatever. Let’s say Kujou likes Victorique. I have a feeling that’s the case. Besides, that would be more interesting. Then what about Victorique?”

“What are you doing?” came a familiar male voice from behind.

Ms. Cecile let out a shriek, sprang to her feet, and erased the diagram she had drawn on the ground with the heel of her shoe.

“Huh? Oh, Kujou...” She turned around and saw Kazuya, holding her glasses, staring at her with a dumbfounded look. She wiped away the cold sweat. “I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Right... I guess you can’t do anything without your glasses. Here.”

Kazuya, in his usual earnest manner, gave Ms. Cecile her glasses. She quickly took them and put them on. Cold sweat trickled down her back.

“As a homeroom teacher, I want to keep track of things, not because I’m a gossip or anything.”

“What? Uh, do you know where Victorique went? I lost sight of her while looking for you.”

“Victorique? I-I don’t know where she went.

Kazuya frowned. “Okay, then.” He walked away.

After a moment of hesitation, Ms. Cecile went after him. “Kujou!”

“Yes?” He turned around.

“Um, have you done your homework? I’m sure you did. This is you we’re talking about.”

“Yeah, I finished them yesterday.”

“Of course you did. How are you feeling?”

“Wh-What? I feel fine. Just a little upset right now because I lost Victorique.”

“I see. Anything troubling you?”

Kazuya froze. He was silent for a moment. But like a bursting dam, he said, “I have a bunch of them, and they never stop coming. First of all, Victorique. She keeps whining about how bored she is, and how she wants me to cause an incident. She won’t let me use the elevator, and she keeps on belittling me, calling me dumb, a simpleton, among other things.”

“Wh-What about Avril?”

“Avril? She’s a very nice girl. I don’t have any problems with her. Anyway, Victorique always has something to say about my gifts, and she

gets mad with just a little poke at her cheek. Also—”

“Anything else?”

“Hmm... Oh, I get a letter from my sister every other day, mostly just her complaining about my father and brothers. It literally never stops. My brother, on the other hand, sends me a book on oriental martial arts every day. One book is enough. They just keep on coming. I have no choice but to study martial arts every night after I finish studying and organizing things. And my mother has been sending a lot of pressed flowers for some reason...”

“Okay, I get it.”

Ms. Cecile’s head was spinning from all the pent-up stress that this kind-hearted oriental boy was releasing.

With nothing more to say, Kazuya bowed and turned to leave, so Ms. Cecile quickly popped the question she really wanted to ask.

“So, what kind of girl do you like?”

Kazuya slowly turned around.

His face was bright red. Ms. Cecile shrank back in astonishment. Kazuya held his cheeks with the palms of his hands like a girl, and after a moment of fidgeting, he spun and bolted away at full speed.

Ms. Cecile fixed her round glasses.

“...Huh?” was all she could say.

“Wh-What’s wrong with her?” Kazuya mumbled as he hurried away. “Seriously, where’d that question even come from? Boys shouldn’t be chatting about such things.”

He staggered and almost fell. “Besides, I-I don’t even know what kind of girl I like...”

Kazuya was walking along a wide pathway leading to the large U-shaped school building. The huge structure blocked out the summer sun, casting shadows on the pathway. He hurried past the building.

The school building was quiet. He couldn’t see any students or teachers in the corridors or classrooms from the outside. It was almost like the long summer break had already begun.

Once vacation started, the school would be deserted like some archeological ruin. Having no plans for the summer vacation, Kazuya felt a

little dejected. Two months were not enough for a trip back home, and too long for a period of relaxation.

He sighed. “Huh?”

At the back entrance to the school building, on the three-step stairs facing the flowerbeds, he spotted the little friend he had been looking for—Victorique de Blois—sitting there. She had the golden book on her lap. She was thinking. Small colorful butterflies were fluttering around her.

“Victorique!” Kazuya called out to her as he trotted toward the stairs. “Are you sure you don’t have candy stuck on your dress or hair?”

“Hmm?” Victorique lifted her head. Kazuya was diligently inspecting her long hair and layers of ruffles. “Stop being so finicky!”

“You’ve got macaroon powder on your butt. No worries, though. I’ll clean it up for you.”

“Stop talking. Go away. You’re distracting me.”

Victorique slapped him on the cheek, and went back to thinking. Kazuya was stunned. He then lowered his hand and sat down beside Victorique. She frowned a little, but didn’t say anything.

“What do you think is going on?” Kazuya asked.

There was no reply. A wind blew.

“What are you talking about?” Victorique said.

“This creepy case. ‘Cause honestly I’m completely stumped. You say the alchemist is gone. But then, who’s responsible for the murders in the clock tower? And what about that eerie presence inside?”

“Who knows?”

“The alchemist is not dead. He just disappeared. But where did he go? If he’s dead, where’s his body? And if he’s alive, where is he? Maybe he’s hiding somewhere very close by. Somewhere in the academy, for example. Otherwise, there’s no way to explain the murders.”

“...”

“No one knows what he actually looks like behind the mask. So if he returned secretly to the academy, no one would recognize him. Am I right?”

Victorique only gave a low grunt in reply.

The wind blew again, and the flowers danced.

“I’ve known where the alchemist is right from the beginning,” Victorique suddenly muttered.

Kazuya jumped. “Wh-What do you mean? How’d you know? Where is he?”

“The reconstruction is not yet done. The last piece still eludes me. Soon, perhaps...” She fell silent, staring at the golden book on her lap.

Kazuya studied her face. Skin as fine and white as porcelain. A face so small and handsome that it could have been mistaken for a doll. Ruthless green eyes.

Another wind blew.

Kazuya stood up quietly so as not to disturb her, and left. Victorique simply sat there without saying anything.

While walking, Kazuya passed a large old man—the carpenter who had been working in the academy for twenty years. The man headed to the flowerbed, to where Victorique was.

Curious, Kazuya looked over his shoulder, when suddenly, he saw red hair in the corner of his eye, and he quickly turned his attention toward it.

From the flowerbed in front of the school building, he could see a tall man hurrying along the path in front of the clock tower, as if to avoid being seen.

A strong gust blew the man’s hat off. He looked up at the hat momentarily as it flew in the wind, but he did not follow it. Hair fluttering, he resumed walking, as though completely forgetting the hat.

He was oddly indifferent about it. He didn’t even try to pick up the hat. Another gust blew, ruffling the man’s hair—hair as red as flame, and just as fierce. The wind seemed to fan the dark flames even higher.

Sensing Kazuya’s gaze, the man turned around. Even from a distance, Kazuya could see the glint in his catlike, upturned green eyes, and his chiseled features, reminiscent of ancient sculptures.

“I’ve seen him before,” Kazuya murmured.

He didn’t recognize the man this morning when he was brought to the clock tower by the inspector’s men. But now, as soon as he saw the red hair and green eyes under the hat, he remembered him clearly.

“I saw him in Saubreme. At the pyramid-looking theater. He jumped out of a carriage.”

The man stared back at Kazuya. Green and jet-black eyes glared at each other.

“Brian Roscoe! The red-haired magician with the Mechanical Turk!”

A few weeks ago, Kazuya visited the capital of Sauville, Saubreme, to do some shopping. It was then that he saw the man, Brian Roscoe, in front of one of the theaters. His show was called “Phantasmagoria,” and advertised tricks such as human dismemberment, the Mechanical Turk, and teleportation.

The poster had read: **Brian Roscoe, the Greatest Magician of the Century!**

The name sounded familiar to Kazuya. A mysterious young man who donated modern facilities to the village of the Gray Wolves deep in the mountains where Victorique’s mother, Cordelia Gallo, was born and raised, was also named Brian Roscoe. He took something that Cordelia had left behind in the village and left a photograph in its place. A picture of Cordelia as an adult and her little daughter, Victorique.

When he saw him at Saubreme, he thought it had to be someone with the same name. That he had nothing to do with Victorique or her mother. But this was too much of a coincidence. How could someone with the same name happen to come to St. Marguerite Academy, where Victorique was imprisoned?

Kazuya gulped. The red-haired man pulled his eyes away and slowly disappeared into the clock tower.

Kazuya clenched his fist. *It has to be him. But what’s he doing here?*

The clock tower was silent.

The man, Brian Roscoe, slowly climbed the stairs, his green eyes glinting.

He could hear the creaking and whirring of the clockworks in the distance. Listening carefully, Brian Roscoe stopped when his ears caught a different sound.

He turned around slowly.

A light set of footsteps, belonging to someone young and slim. The owner of the footsteps was trying to sneak into the clock tower silently, watching Brian Roscoe.

Who could it be? Brian cocked his head so much that his neck cracked. Rage and suspicion fanned his flaming hair. *What do they plan to do with me? Hmm, interesting. I’ll play along.*

Brian slowly walked up the stairs. He padded down the dark corridor and entered the clockwork room.

Whirr.

The alchemist's workshop was gray and dreary, filled with dusty air all the way to the high ceiling. Like a giant blade cutting through the air, a pendulum swung slowly from side to side.

Four huge clockworks were creaking in the corners, sounding like a monster screeching. They moved endlessly, intertwining, gears grinding against gears.

It felt unreal, like stumbling upon a manufacturing plant straight out of a nightmare.

Brian furrowed his brow and looked around the workshop. Then he listened again.

Faint footsteps were slowly approaching, searching for Brian's presence. They walked up the stairs, down the corridor, and then stopped in front of the workshop, hesitating.

Scared? Shaking? Fascinating. If you want to run away, I'll let you go. But who are you?

Brian waited.

But the owner of the footsteps did not leave. They quietly opened the door and stepped into the workshop.

Brian jumped out from behind the door and extended his sturdy arm to the owner of the footsteps. He grabbed the stranger's surprisingly thin neck from behind and forced them to turn around.

"Hmm?"

The stranger yelped and stared up into Brian's face. Brian, too, was startled as he regarded the owner of the footsteps—a thin, lanky boy with jet-black hair. He appeared to be an oriental.

There was fear, but also firm determination, in the boy's jet-black eyes as he stared back at him.

Brian tilted his head curiously. He studied the boy—Kazuya Kujou—from head to toe.

"Just a kid," he said. "And an oriental one at that."

Before he could pull his hand away, Kazuya twisted around and escaped from his grip.

Brian gasped. He observed Kazuya closely, his brow furrowed in thought.

Kazuya's dark eyes narrowed.

"I remember now," Brian said. "Saubreme. In front of the theater. We've met there before, haven't we? Yes, when I brought in the Mechanical Turk."

"Brian Roscoe," Kazuya said in a low, wary voice. "What are you doing in the academy? You're here for Victorique, aren't you? What are you going to do with her?"

Brian grinned. He found the boy's mature manner of speaking amusing. His gaze then turned suspicious.

"What are you to Victorique?" he asked.

"I'm Kujou, Victorique's friend!" Kazuya bellowed in an attempt to mask his fear.

Brian looked stunned for a moment, then started laughing.

"Wh-What's so funny?"

"Can you really blame me for laughing? Listen, boy, and listen carefully. Gray Wolves can't make friends. Maybe in that nameless village, but not in the city. Gray Wolves will never get used to people, and people are afraid of them. The only ones who approach them are those who want to use their powers."

Brian's voice gradually took on a sad tone.

Various images popped in and out of his mind. The pain of living in the city as a Gray Wolf. The small figure of that woman he met, someone who shared the same blood.

Brian's green eyes narrowed like a cat's, and he exhaled softly.

"That's not true," Kazuya said in a trembling voice. "Victorique and I are friends. Sure, she was unapproachable at first, and she still doesn't make any sense to me at all, but we're friends nonetheless."

"Friends? With a Gray Wolf? Hahahaha!"

Brian laughed hysterically.

"You think it's funny? Well, I don't." Kazuya's face was serious.

Brian stopped laughing and glared at the boy.

The room was filled with the whirring of four giant clockworks, grinding, spinning endlessly. A faint breeze blew, ruffling Brian's red hair and Kazuya's jet-black hair. The huge pendulum swung idly.

A lone red flower glistened among the yellows and purples on the stained-glass window. The large ebony table was littered with dusty lab equipment.

An eerie workshop where time stood still.

Brian licked his lips. His red tongue seemed a little longer than the average human's. Canine teeth peeked out from the corners of his mouth.

An eerie, bloody smell suddenly filled the workshop. Brian thought Kazuya would leave now, but to his surprise, the boy stayed, never turning his back.

I like it!

Brian leapt.

Kazuya jumped to the side, and Brian landed where Kazuya had just been. He turned his head to look at Kazuya, licking his tongue like an animal who had found its prey.

"I just came here to check on her," Brian said. "A friend of mine had some business at this academy, so I took the opportunity."

"Check up on who? Victorique?"

"Yeah. I heard a rumor that the Gray Wolf was going to be transferred somewhere soon. I thought now was a good time to check, though I think they're growing up faster than expected."

"Are you talking about Victorique?"

"Not her body, no." His voice turned dark. "Her brain!"

Hours earlier, in just one moment, Brian came to a realization.

One day he met a fellow countryman in the city, Cordelia Gallo. She was small, beautiful, and somewhat strange. Something must have changed in her when she was forced to leave her home village and descend the mountain in fear. Brian had watched over his beautiful little compatriot as she worked as a dancer.

But one night, a shady guest arrived in the audience filled with lively music, dancing, and coquettish voices. The guest found Cordelia, and she disappeared afterward. When they met again years later, Cordelia told him that she had given birth to a daughter in the tower of a certain nobleman—the guest from that night—and that he had taken her away from her.

Brian was terrified of the girl—a girl born to a Gray Wolf and a human. The little girl, imprisoned in a tower, was transferred to St. Marguerite

Academy. Rumors said that she might disappear from the school. Brian decided to come here to check on her. He had to see how she had grown up.

Today, Brian found her. A little girl with an enormous, bizarre brain. A huge labyrinth that contained all sorts of knowledge, from ancient to modern, the beautiful to the ugly.

The chosen Gray Wolf, and her magnificent power.

And now the state had held her captive.

Poor little girl.

This had been the nobleman's goal from the beginning. When Brian realized it, he trembled with rage and shame.

"Growing faster than expected?" Kazuya breathed. "Victorique hasn't done anything wrong. How can you say that?" The oriental boy's shoulders were shaking with anger.

Brian found his face comical.

I knew it, he thought to himself. *Humans don't understand a thing.*

He was laughing so hard that he was foaming at the corners of his mouth. He could roll on the floor cackling at any moment. But he eventually calmed down.

"She hasn't done anything wrong? Of course, I know that. The problem is that the creature is being held captive." His voice dropped low. "Those who use the power of the Old Ones are enemies. We want peace and stability. Days of constancy. Eternal Middle Ages. That wish may not come true in this day and age, but we will resist and fight to the end. There are many other Old Ones besides the Gray Wolves lurking in the Old World. They're waiting with bated breath, thinking about the young cub trapped behind enemy lines. Change robs us of the freedom we've enjoyed since ancient times. The child is Cordelia's daughter, and the blood of my people flows in her veins. But the other half of her blood is different. It's the blood of a nobleman working at the heart of this country. We cannot forget that."

"I've verified it today. She's a *monstre charmant*. And her little head..." His voice trembled ominously. "...is Europe's last and most powerful weapon."

Brian closed in on Kazuya, one step at a time.

The clockworks whirred as they spun.

Kazuya looked around the workshop.

Brian licked his tongue. *You're not going anywhere.* Like a cat playing with a mouse, he pounced on Kazuya, narrowly missing him and then chasing him down again. He tried to grab his arm and pin him down, but the boy slipped away. He was no longer at the same spot. He followed him with his eyes. Kazuya leapt onto the table, grabbed something, and then jumped to the giant clockwork. Brian's brows furrowed in surprise at the boy's swift movements.

Kazuya landed on the spinning clockwork, ran on top of it, and jumped to the next one.

Brian jumped onto the clockwork, too, in pursuit of the boy.

Kazuya jumped to the second clockwork. To the third one.

Then he landed on the fourth mechanism. There was no more after that. Brian thought that he had caught up with the pesky rat. He grinned. But before he could jump to the fourth clockwork, the boy stopped and spun around to face him.

Brian's eyes grew wide.



The movement of the gears pushed Kazuya's body back toward Brian with increasing momentum. In his hand was a metal equipment that he had grabbed from the table. Using the speed of the clockwork's spin, the boy jumped at Brian and hit him in the face with the piece of metal so hard that Brian froze and covered his face with his hands.

Just before he was sucked between two clockworks, Brian twisted his body and tumbled far down to the floor below, roaring like a beast.

When he finally managed to open one eye, he saw the small oriental boy swiftly jumping down. His clear, jet-black eyes said he was solely focused on taking down the enemy before him. Unwavering black eyes with no hint of malice in them. Brian roared, and dodged to the right. Kazuya landed on the spot where Brian had just been. The metal equipment he was holding made a dull clunk as it dug into the floor, right where Brian's head had been a second ago.

Kazuya turned around.

The quiet but determined glint in his eyes sent a shiver down Brian's spine. He screamed in an attempt to drown out the fear, and, holding one eye, lunged at Kazuya. The boy leapt to dodge, but he followed, kicking his arm. The impact told him that he almost broke the boy's arm. The boy let out a yelp, but did not let go of the metal in his grip. Brian kicked him a couple more times. Finally, the equipment fell from the boy's hand. Before Brian could pick it up, Kazuya kicked it away.

Kazuya then jumped up and mounted Brian. He raised his fist and punched the man in the face. But the punch made Brian realize that his bare hands packed several times more power than the boy's. He struck the boy back from below as hard as he could, hitting his left eye. Kazuya reeled back, feeling lightheaded.

Brian got up and pinned Kazuya down. Right before he could hit the boy, he heard him shout something.

He listened carefully.

"Don't you dare put Victorique in danger!" was what he seemed to be saying.

Amused, Brian suddenly started laughing. He found the boy's sheer desperation both hilarious and oddly moving.

"Sure, I barely know anything," he said. "I don't know the circumstances of Victorique's birth, or why she's locked up in here. But I

know one thing: Victorique is smart, but strange. She's an enigma... but she's human. Just a little girl. She's not someone to be exterminated. I won't let anyone call her a monster, or a weapon!"

Brian contemplated for a moment, then sighed, and got off Kazuya.

"Didn't expect her to have a knight in shining armor," he said, cracking his neck.

"I want to protect Victorique. I'll keep her safe from the dangers around her."

"I see." Brian grinned.

The boy, face red with rage, glared at him.

"Can you protect her with that kind of power?"

"...What do you mean?"

Brian closed his eyes. The world was too big a place, the power of a lone boy too insignificant.

Slowly, he opened his green eyes. Kazuya was staring at him. The unwavering look in his eyes made Brian feel unusually sentimental.

"A big, big storm awaits the cub." Brian murmured. "That thing was born during the first storm. Birthed according to plan, to be used as a trump card for the second storm, the magnitude of which a single, kind-hearted boy can do nothing against. You will cry. Despair will eat at you. You will curse your own helplessness. Grief will change you. What will happen to you then? Will you still be kind? Or will you also become a little monster?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's fine if you don't know. I think I'll observe for a while longer. Watch how the boy and the cub spend their peaceful days." He exhaled softly.

"Which, I believe, won't last that long."

Brian turned on his heel, but before he could leave, Kazuya called him back.

"W-Wait a minute!"

Brian turned around. He took something out of his pocket, handed it to Kazuya, and grinned. It was a poster for his performance. The boy did not look at it; he kept his gaze on Brian.

"Watch out for the transfer. Marquis de Blois is a fickle man."

"What?"

Brian smirked and opened the door. He brought his right hand in front of his face.

“Now I’m gonna make myself disappear.”

He snapped his fingers.

Kazuya stood in the middle of the workshop, staring at Brian.

His whole body ached, his breath was ragged, and his mind was filled with agitation, anger, and suspicion.

Brian Roscoe mumbled something and snapped his fingers. And then immediately he vanished.

It was just like the scene in the horror movie *The Illusion of the Black Tower*. He thought he saw a wisp of smoke, but he couldn’t be sure, and he smelled something sweet. After a moment of vertigo, he strained his eyes, and no one was there.

Kazuya rushed to the spot where Brian Roscoe had just been standing. He was gone.

He looked around the workshop, then opened the door, and stepped out into the corridor.

He looked to the right, then to the left.

The corridor was empty.

He ran and peered down the stairs, which would’ve creaked if there was someone there. But he saw no one. Kazuya ran around in the clock tower, then went outside and surveyed the surroundings.

Brian Roscoe was gone.

How?

Kazuya stood frozen.

The summer sun was glaring on him. It was hot outside, the sunlight intense—a typical summer day. It was as if the gray workshop inside the clock tower was a whole different world.

Kazuya suddenly remembered the poster that Brian Roscoe gave him. He opened it.

It read: **Brian Roscoe, the Magician of the Century, and the Mysterious Mechanical Turk!**

It was an advertisement for his show called Phantasmagoria. It featured Teleportation, Amputation, and Dancing Skeletons.

The date and place said... A theater in a town in England. There were three shows: one at 1:00 p.m., another at 4:00 p.m., and one last at 7:00 p.m. The dates were three days from yesterday to tomorrow.

“Weird,” Kazuya said. “Shouldn’t he be in England right now? But he was here until moments ago, and he was in the village yesterday.”

He gasped, remembering something.

The street urchin who was with him when he saw Brian Roscoe for the first time in Saubreme said:

“There’s something off with that guy. There were a few times when it didn’t seem like a trick, like he was really in two places at the same time. He would appear on one side of the road and the other at about the same time. He pretends to be a magician, but I think he’s the real deal. I’m curious about the Mechanical Turk, but that guy gives me the creeps.”

Kazuya gaped at the poster.

“Two places at the same time?” he mused. “I find that hard to believe. Hmm, he *did* vanish into thin air... But if he can do that, he could’ve committed the murder. If he could be at the inn and the clock tower at the same time, that is... No way.” He shook his head, and heaved a sigh.

Anxiety gripped his heart. He was worried for his friend Victorique. He felt restless, like he had a number of times before.

Who exactly was Victorique de Blois?

What’s going to happen to her? What kind of fate awaited her?

Maybe I’m not strong enough to protect her. No, that’s quitter talk. But what do I do?

Kazuya stood still, anger flaring within him. A gust ruffled his jet-black hair. Dead branches groaned ominously in the wind.

As Kazuya stood there, stunned, footsteps came running from behind him.

“Kujou!”

It was Avril’s voice. She sounded as lively as ever.

“Ms. Cecile told me you were looking for Victorique. I saw her talking to a huge carpenter behind the school building. Hello? Earth to Kujou?”

Avril’s cheerful voice brought him back to reality.

“Oh, sorry,” Kazuya said, turning around. “I’m listening. What was it again?”

“I said Victorique is over—Kyaaa!”

Avril screamed when he saw Kazuya’s face.

Startled, Kazuya yelped in response. “Wh-What was that scream about?”

She pointed at his face. “What happened to your face?!”

“What...?”

Curious what she was talking about, Kazuya rushed to a nearby fountain and checked his reflection in the water.

“What the...”

The top of his left eye was swollen, where Brian Roscoe punched him earlier.

“W-We have to cool it down!” Avril said.

“Good idea. A cold towel should do the trick.”

Splash!

Avril grabbed Kazuya’s head with both hands and shoved it into the water. Kazuya thrashed about.

“We have to cool it down with water! We have to cool you down!”

“Av... ril...!”

Kazuya, flailing helplessly in the cold water of the fountain, was thinking of one thing only: the *monstre charmant* that Brian had told him about.

Behind the school building of St. Marguerite Academy, at the three-step stairs where Kazuya and Avril usually hung out to chat, a small girl was sitting down, her luxurious dress billowing around her. She had a golden book, the alchemist’s memoir, tucked under her buttocks, and was mumbling to herself with clenched fists.

Colorful butterflies flitted around her, and even a few squirrels from a nearby thicket were scurrying around her tiny head and shoulders. Two little squirrels began wrestling over a single nut on her head. Victorique, ignoring everything around her, was lost in thought.

Then, a large man appeared through a small pathway between the flowerbeds. When he saw that Victorique was all alone, he strode toward her.

“There you are, little lady,” the carpenter said as he sat down next to her.

The stone stairs shook. Victorique, her green eyes widening in surprise, glanced at her side. The carpenter smiled at her.

The difference in their body sizes was so huge that side by side they looked like a giant and a fairy. The carpenter took a rolled-up piece of paper out of his pocket, spat on his palms, and unfolded the parchment.

It bore a detailed diagram—a survey of the clock tower.

“Your effort is appreciated.” Victorique nodded grandly like a queen, and took the blueprint.

The carpenter was stunned for a moment. Then he burst into laughter.

“Now this is hilarious! ‘Your effort is appreciated.’ You’re one amusing pipsqueak.”

He grabbed Victorique’s head with his large hand, which he had spat on, and rubbed it adoringly. Victorique jumped like a stray cat being touched by a human for the first time and scrambled away to the top of the stone steps.

“D-D-Don’t touch me!”

“I can’t explain the blueprint to you unless you come down here.”

Victorique reluctantly went back down the steps. “You didn’t touch any of the stuff in the clockwork room, did you?” she asked in an annoyed, but slightly concerned tone.

“Nope.” The carpenter shook his head. “Why do you keep warning me about it, though?”

“Because a monster still lurks in that workshop.”

“Hmm?”

The carpenter looked puzzled, and shrugged. He then proceeded to describe the clock tower in a booming voice that reverberated throughout the area.

His voice lured Ms. Cecile. When she spotted Victorique, she came over.

“Listen closely, little girl. These are the results of the measurements. The blue lines are what I think should be the original plan. The black lines show the actual construction. I’ve always had a feeling that something was off, but this was a surprise for sure.”

Ms. Cecile peered at the blueprint. “Oh, is that the clock tower? Hmm... What’s that little square box in the middle?”

“It’s most likely a secret chamber for the Protestants,” Victorique murmured.

The teacher inclined her head, but before she could ask another question, Kazuya and Avril appeared from between the flowerbeds.

Ms. Cecile turned to greet them, then froze when she saw Kazuya.

He was soaked from the head down, and his left eye was black and swollen, as if someone had hit him. Victorique cast him a glance and stifled a laugh.

“What happened to you?” Ms. Cecile asked with concern.

Kazuya glanced at Victorique hesitantly. He tried to say something, but decided against it.

“It was Avril,” he said, pointing at his friend.

Ms. Cecile’s wide-eyed gaze darted back and forth between the two. “What?”

“Y-You’re making it sound like I wanted to hurt you. I was trying to cool you down,” Avril protested.

“I almost drowned!”

Victorique stood up and started walking, her frills swaying around her. Kazuya, Avril, and Ms. Cecile quickly followed her.

“Where are you going?” Kazuya asked.

Victorique turned around, confused. “The clock tower, where else?”

“To do what?”

“To solve the mystery.”

Kazuya gasped. Avril and Cecile exchanged curious looks.

“Does that mean...”

Victorique glanced at Kazuya, who was dripping wet.

Kazuya saw in her face liberty, freedom for a moment from the long weariness, boredom, and despair that always enveloped her. He had seen this look several times in the past.

She wore the same expression when she finished picking up the fragments of chaos, playing with them, and reconstructing them. Victorique was not bored now. She had played with the mystery and solved it.

Kazuya swallowed. “You figured it out, didn’t you? You solved the mystery of the Leviathan, the man who, more than twenty years ago, built an alchemy workshop in the clock tower to manufacture gold and get close to the king and queen, and how he disappeared after being shot with poisoned arrows by the Royal Knights. The mysterious murders that started happening around the same time. The victims died in the workshop, locked from the inside. None of them were students or staff of the school, but travelers and trespassers. And...”

Avril nodded and continued. “The ghost of Leviathan wandering the clock tower. Doors open and things move on their own even when no one’s there. Also there’s a shadow passing outside the second-floor window.”

“About that...”

Ms. Cecile intervened before they could start arguing. “Now, now. What about the mystery behind Leviathan’s mask? The biggest mystery, though, is the murder.”

The three shared glances and turned to Victorique.

Her cherry lips parted, and she yawned, looking bored.

“Kujou, newt, you’re with me,” she said in her husky voice. “Cecile, you go and find that dumb detective with the drill for a head. Let’s go.”

“Go where? The clock tower?”

“Yes. To check something. Kujou.”

“Yeah.”

“Very well. Come with me.”

Victorique started walking toward the clock tower.

“I believe there are two reasons why there are so many ghost stories about the clock towers,” Victorique began. “First, a mysterious alchemist did, in fact, live in the building at one point.”

The group—Victorique, Kazuya, Avril, Ms. Cecile, and Inspector Blois and his men, a total of seven people—opened the door and made their way down the dark corridor. They could only see each other’s silhouettes. The dust in the air stung their eyes.

Victorique’s husky voice reverberated oddly everywhere.

“And the second is the sensation that you’re feeling right now.”

“What are you talking about?” Kazuya asked.

“Don’t you feel dizzy, like someone is putting pressure on you?”

They all looked at each other.

She was right. From the moment they entered the clock tower and started walking down the corridor, they felt dizzy, and their sense of balance went haywire.

“I asked for an accurate survey of the clock tower. This diagram is the result. My guess was right. Take a look.”

Victorique stopped and, relying on the faint light from the window, unfolded the blueprint. They all peered into the odd sketch. A long, narrow

cylindrical tower with a chamber of clockworks in the center. The tower drawn using blue lines looked completely normal, but the black one looked bizarre, distorted hideously.

It was tilted, warped as if a giant hand had crushed it, and looked like it could collapse at any moment.

“Wh-What’s going on here?” Kazuya murmured.

“The blue lines represent the original plan. And the black lines show the actual construction. Do you get it now? This is the cause of the strange sensation. The clock tower is warped. The sketch shows why you feel dizzy as soon as you start walking down the corridor. As you can see, the floor of this corridor is not parallel to the ground, but tilted ever so slightly. It looks straight to the naked eye, but it meanders little by little. The corridor becomes narrower as you go further inside, making it appear longer than it actually is. In other words, what we perceive through our vision and what our body feels are not the same. That’s what makes you feel queasy.”

Kazuya and the others looked at each other.

Victorique folded the sketch and resumed walking. She turned a corner and started up the stairs.

“And these stairs. When Cecile and I came here, she stumbled around this area.”

Ms. Cecile scratched her head in embarrassment.

Kazuya recalled the time Avril tripped at the same spot and tumbled down the stairs, screaming.

“The stairs are also deliberately crooked. Common sense dictates that each step of the stairs should have the same height. But not here. The height of each step is slightly different. It is why you trip as you go up and fall. This can also explain the silhouette crossing outside the window on the second floor. This second floor is lower than how we perceive it. We might be going up the stairs, but the corridor we passed before actually descends a little, so this floor is lower than expected. It was that huge carpenter who passed by the window. Not a ghost, nor a giant.”

Victorique made it on top of the stairs and stopped in front of the clockwork room.

The door was open.

“It’s the same reason the door opens even when no one is there. When someone enters the tower and starts walking down the first-floor corridor,

this door opens, most likely because of the skewed layout. As for random things moving by themselves, the slanted flooring's the culprit."

Victorique had Ms. Cecile remove her glasses and placed them on a chair.

As everyone watched, the glasses moved slowly and fell to the floor.

A forbidding silence fell over the clockwork room. Giant mechanisms whirred in the dim workshop.

The huge pendulum, slowly swinging above, produced an eerie breeze.

"But why build the tower like this?" Avril murmured.

"Elementary. Check the sketch again."

Victorique unfolded the blueprint and pointed to a spot.

At a small square area.

A room not found inside the blue lines. On the warped, black-outlined sketch, there was a small square space next to the clockwork room.

"The tower was built slanted to accommodate a hidden room. They adjusted the heights and the angles a little to create a space not found on the original plan."

"For what?"

"To hide Protestants, most likely."

Victorique turned around and stared at the area where the secret room was supposed to be.

On the other side of the large ebony table was a colorful stained-glass window in the colorless gray of the workshop. It depicted bright flowers in full bloom—yellow, purple, and a single red one.

"Temples and houses built in the Middle Ages often had hidden rooms, secret passages disguised as fixed windows, and various other mechanisms. This academy has been called the secret armory of the Sauville royal family since the Middle Ages. All sorts of things were concealed, stored, and developed here. Weapons of the future, people who should not be alive, secret assets. I suspect there are other hidden rooms on campus besides this one."

Inspector Grevil de Blois, who had been silent for some time now, clicked his tongue. He shot his sister a scornful glare, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

Victorique cast Inspector Blois a cursory glance. The inspector looked away first.

“I think, back in the Middle Ages, this clock tower was used to hide things. But these days, only a few people know about that. Now let us talk about the gold, the same gold mentioned in the song. We turn back the clock about fifty years to the end of 1873, when the Africans died.”

Victorique suddenly kicked Kazuya, who was standing next to her, in the leg.

Kazuya jumped. “Ouch!”

“Sing, Kujou,” she ordered.

“No way... Wait, sing what?”

Victorique’s shoulders shook. “The African song, what else?”

“No. Why is it always me? Ow! Fine...”

Kazuya endured the shame and straightened his posture. Putting his hands on his hips, he started singing softly.

**Africans say,
March, march I say!
Till the hens sing!
Till the stars fall from the torn roof!
Du da du da doo...
Even in dreams
March, march I say!
Du da du da doo...
From afar, the Africans came.
They walked, and walked, all the way.
Walk, walk I say!
Du da du da doo...
Africans came from across the sea.
They rowed their boats, rowed their boats, all the way.
Row, row I say!
Pretty sisters, mother, and father!
Flesh and blood is cheap, bread is expensive, but keep on rowing!
Du da du da doo...
Gold and black skin
Row, row I say!
Du da du da doo...
The Africans leapt over the scorching land,**

screamed, and disappeared.

When he finished singing, Kazuya shut his mouth, feeling embarrassed. Everyone regarded him silently in surprise.

“I’ve been thinking,” Victorique said. “You’re oddly good at singing.”

“How is it odd? Anyway, I’m not doing this ever again! Boys shouldn’t be dancing and singing in public—”

“Hush. That’s enough from you. Shut your mouth and look unspeakably sad.”

Kazuya closed his mouth and did as he was told.

“The lyrics contain several fragments of chaos,” Victorique continued.

“The African song, which had been sung in the village for about fifty years, mentions gold. Where did they come from, and for why did they ‘walk’ and ‘row’ to this village? What does gold and black skin refer to? And finally they ‘screamed’ and ‘disappeared.’ But what does it mean?”

Kazuya and the others exchanged glances.

“No idea...”

“We know that they died and were buried in the village cemetery at the end of 1873. Which brings me to my next point, an important event in history.” Victorique grinned. “This event holds the truth to the Leviathan’s terrifying mystery. He did not create gold using alchemy. Recall your history.” She paused. Her ruthless green eyes gleamed, as if staring into the void. “1873 was the year the gold rush started in the African continent.”

The group let out a collective gasp and glanced at each other.

A heavy silence descended in the room. With Victorique quiet, no one else spoke. There was only the sound of the clockworks whirring endlessly.

Avril felt something invisible pass in front of her. A shiver ran down her spine. The floor in front of her slowly warped and creaked as something strode past from right before her toward Kazuya. When it reached the little Victorique standing in front of the group, that something stared at her, narrowed its eyes in admiration, and then slowly reached out to touch her rosy cheek.

Avril snapped back to her senses. There were eight of them present: Victorique, Kazuya, Avril, Ms. Cecile, Inspector Blois and his two subordinates...

No, seven.

Avril swallowed. She had a feeling that someone else was there.

An eerie atmosphere blanketed the workshop. She felt as if it would swallow her whole. Or maybe it already had.

Victorique resumed talking, and Avril shifted her attention to her.

The clockworks continued spinning.

“Now I present a hypothesis,” Victorique went on. “Listen closely. The Africans who came walking and rowing in 1873 brought gold from Africa, the Dark Continent. Gold that was mined from the gold rush. All the gold and diamond mines in Africa at that time were owned by European countries. Africans did not benefit at all from the resources. Instead, they were made to work like cart horses, and one by one, they died. The gold was transported to St. Marguerite Academy, the secret armory and vault of the Kingdom of Sauville. It was then brought to the clock tower and hidden in a secret room. The Africans were probably killed to silence them. This happened at the end of the year. For the next twenty years, the gold lay dormant here, unbeknownst to anyone. Then one day, in the year 1897, someone arrived. A man in a mask and a robe: Leviathan.”

Victorique eyed everyone.

“He somehow knew about the secret of the clock tower. He was probably the only one who did. He introduced himself as an alchemist and used this room, where the secret chamber is located, as his workshop. He magically produced gold from nothing, and soon became a star. It wasn’t magic, of course. There was plenty of gold around. An inexhaustible supply, in fact, right in this very room. He just took some, melted it down, reshaped it, and presented it to people.”

“But why did no one else know about it?” Kazuya asked.

“It’s simple. The king had everything done in secret. He had the gold transported without anyone’s knowledge and then silenced everyone involved. But the king suddenly passed away at the beginning of the following year. There was a grand funeral and the succession of a new, young king. I believe the secret of the gold vanished in the midst of the furor. That’s why the fortune wasn’t used during the storm that hit during the new king’s term—the Great War. No one knew about it. Except for one person, Leviathan. Don’t touch that, Avril Bradley!”

Everybody turned their attention to Avril. She had wandered to the stained glass, goggling at the flower garden depicted on it.

Startled, she looked at Victorique. “Wh-Why not?”

“I was about to verbalize the reason,” Victorique replied in her husky voice.

She put a pipe in her mouth and lit it. Ms. Cecile tried to take it away from her, but Victorique circled around Kazuya. The teacher gave a sigh of resignation.

“Kujou, do you remember what I told you about alchemy?”

“You mentioned a lot of things, but yeah, I remember most of it.”

“Share it with us, then. What is the goal of alchemy?”

Kazuya wore a serious look. “To create something out of nothing. Gold, in particular, then immortality, and homunculus.”

“Using what?”

“Uh, something called the Philosopher’s Stone. A stone with mystical powers.”

“Yes. And what color is it?”

“Deep red as a pomegranate.”

“Hmm.” Victorique nodded in satisfaction. She then cast a sweeping glance at everyone. “The first thing that draws one’s attention when they enter this workshop is, of course, the huge clockworks and the pendulum. They’re a sight to behold. But not some people.”

“Who are you talking about?” Kazuya asked.

“Cecile, I have a question for you. The people who have died in this workshop over the past twenty years with discolored index fingers were all outsiders, correct? Newly-appointed teachers, travelers, and the like.”

Ms. Cecile nodded. “That’s right. Students of the academy would sometimes come in and fool around, but they were all fine.”

“Nothing surprising there,” Victorique said. “Now take a look around this workshop. Clockworks, a pendulum, and a huge table filled with lab equipment. Only those who wander in aimlessly would be fascinated by these things. But if you were to enter with the express purpose of learning the secrets of alchemy, what would be the first thing that would catch your eye? Inside this gray workshop is a stained-glass depicting a flower garden, which, at first glance, seems unrelated to alchemy.”

Victorique walked toward the stained glass.

Among the countless yellows and purples was a lone fiery flower, red as pomegranate.

“This is the only red in the workshop,” Victorique said, pointing at the flower. “A small red stone burning in the dark, gray room. If you broke in searching for clues about alchemy, would you not reach for this?”

Inspector Blois gasped. His men scurried to the stained-glass and stretched their hands out.

“Don’t touch that,” Victorique said.

“...Why not?”

“It’s poisoned. I believe the trespassers touched it with their index fingers. The poison has been there for more than twenty years. Leviathan applied it right before he died.”

The inspector’s men backed away in fear. Victorique, standing in front of them, began rifling through the lab equipment on the large table and eventually found a long, thin rod. She gripped it tight.

“It goes without saying that Leviathan was not immortal,” she said. “He was shot with poisoned arrows by the Royal Knights that night, and he died in this workshop. But he did not want his body found. He had to take the secret underneath his mask with him to the grave. He probably entered the hidden room from the workshop, and then silently passed away inside. Finding his body means finding the gold and revealing the secret of alchemy. It is time, Leviathan.”

Victorique stood on tiptoe and pushed the red stone of the stained glass with the rod. At first, the stone only quivered, barely moving, but then it suddenly made a loud noise and sprang forward.

Numerous needles, red as blood, jutted out. It looked exactly like the flower of a pomegranate. Reddish-purple fluid was dripping from the tips of the needles. Slowly, the needles retracted.

Victorique pushed hard again with the tip of the rod.

This time, the stained glass creaked.

Like a drawbridge it slowly rose, emitting an eerie groan.

The radiant golden light shining from the other side gradually brightened the dark workshop. Everyone shielded their eyes from the blinding light. One by one, they grunted in surprise, staring in disbelief at what lay before them.

An inexhaustible pile of gold filled the room from the floor to the ceiling high above, glittering spectacularly.

And in front of it was a large, sinister-looking man, standing like a giant guard at the entrance to hell.

He was wearing a mask and a robe. Both his feet were planted firmly on the floor, his arms outstretched upward. His body, crumbling after decades of decay, was riddled with countless arrows.

No one said a word.

“I found you, Leviathan,” Victorique said in a cheery voice. “I win. How do you like that?” Then, she uttered the words she had been rehearsing in her mind. “Are you frustrated?”

The corpse did not answer.

It simply twitched. There was a crackling sound.

Victorique strode up to the man, much larger than her, and stared up at him. She gazed into the gaping eye sockets behind the mask and smiled softly.

“Leviathan, the fearsome sorcerer. I know what you look like under the mask.” She chuckled. “Surprised? I will bring it to light, now.”

Victorique spun around. It looked like the huge masked man attended her.



“One night fifty years ago, at the end of 1873, a magic trick was performed,” she began. “Magicians call it Black Art. When a black object is superimposed on a black background and illuminated, it becomes invisible to the human eye. It’s how they make skeletons dance, or heads float in the air. The trick is simple: have a man wearing black clothes with skeletal patterns on them dance, or have a woman wearing black clothes with only her head exposed walk around. Kujou. You and your friend heard a certain ghost story in the village cemetery, didn’t you? A story about an invisible ghost that ran through the empty cemetery on a moonlit night. The footprints started at the edge of the cemetery, right around the burial mound of the Africans, and cut through the cemetery before disappearing somewhere.”

Victorique’s ruthless green eyes widened as she continued.

“That night, a dark-skinned boy ran through the darkness. The Africans were killed, but one boy came back to life and rose from the grave. This explains the invisible ghost. It was Black Art all along. This trick was actually conceived when a magician happened to use a black assistant who blended in with the black background and became invisible. And that same thing happened that night in the village cemetery.”

“The boy who rose from the grave that night and disappeared returned to the village twenty years later. Being the lone survivor, only he knew about the secret gold stashed in this workshop.” Victorique’s voice was low.

The masked man’s corpse shook, as if frightened. Victorique turned around and gently stretched her hand toward the corpse.

“Foolish one. I know what lies underneath your mask. O’ foolish one, are you angry?”

She stood on tiptoe, but she couldn’t reach his face. She jumped up and down, her face turning crimson. Kazuya quickly lifted her small body up. Victorique blushed even harder as she flailed her legs around.

“I know,” she murmured as she removed the mask.

A collective gasp rose from the group, and they retreated a few steps.

The corpse’s face was halfway decomposed. Its eye sockets were gaping holes, from which no expression could be discerned. Its lips were wide open, and the gums were exposed, as if he drew his last breath while screaming. The corpse looked like something out of a nightmare, with its anguished pose and horrifying look.

Its leftover skin was as glossy and jet-black as tanned leather.

Inspector Blois took a deep breath. “Leviathan was African?!”

“That he was, Grevil,” Victorique murmured.

She glared at the two large caverns—the eye sockets.

“We meet at last, Leviathan. You were here the whole time, weren’t you? You’ve been waiting for someone to find your memoir and speak on your behalf. I knew all along. The man who risked his life to enter the Kingdom of Sauville’s politics and get involved in its colonial policies was an African. You hid that fact the entire time. You pretended to be a strange alchemist. What a man. Leviathan—no, we have no way of knowing your true name now, but I do know one thing: you were not trying to be a tyrant. You just wanted to save your country. You risked your life to get behind enemy lines and restore freedom to your burning homeland, which the white men of Europe were taking for themselves. It’s a shame that you met such an end before you could achieve your goal. It all happened a long time ago, though. Now it’s nothing but a dream.”

Victorique chuckled. Kazuya gently lowered her on the floor.

“You were quite an interesting fellow. You’re dead now, unfortunately.”

The corpse’s mouth seemed to move a little. As if to say goodbye, Leviathan’s dry corpse squirmed. Victorique’s eyes widened.

“With this, I, Victorique de Blois, child of Marquis de Blois, hereby end my role as the spokesperson of the fool. This is goodbye.”

A strong gust suddenly blew. The pendulum swung loudly, producing a huge wind that shook their ears. The corpse trembled. Then, like a tree toppling, the body fell on its back, slamming onto the pile of gold.

There was a loud thud, and a cloud of dust rose. Kazuya swiftly crouched down to shield Victorique. The jet-black figure towering over them had crumbled to dust, vanishing like an illusion.

“A dream,” Victorique murmured.

The robe alone drifted slowly toward the gold.

The mask fell from Victorique’s tiny hands.

The alchemist was gone.

“Au revoir, dark fiend!” she cried softly.

Leviathan 4

Ladies and gentlemen.

Here I detail my end that was not written in my memoir—my own death.

I am walking, bleeding all over.

The Royal Knights have launched an attack on the clock tower, shooting poisoned arrows as they pursue me.

A gag order has been placed on the students; they are in their dormitory rooms, studying as if nothing is happening. This has always been the case in this academy. Whenever something top-secret was happening, those creepy students were always quiet. Despite my howls, the Royal Knights' footsteps and shouts, the school remained silent, as if we were nothing but an eerie mirage created by a gathering fog.

I am walking.

My body is tough to begin with. I lived longer than the adults who came to Sauville with me, survived under the earth in which we were buried alive. But the poison from the arrows was gradually robbing me of my consciousness.

I am walking.

...Why?

I did not know. For the past few weeks, the Royal Knights surrounding the clock tower had remained on standby, watching quietly. I thought that the young man—Albert, an official of the Ministry of the Occult—had pulled some strings. I was pretending to spend all my time experimenting to create what he had asked me to create. Yes, I was pretending. Because in reality, I am incapable of creating anything. Nothing at all.

But tonight, the Royal Knights suddenly moved.

Perhaps the Ministry of the Occult lost the battle against the Academy of Science. Or perhaps it was the decision of the king himself.

I am walking.

One step, then another.

I knew that I would not survive. The poison keeps circulating in my body. My legs grow heavy, my eyelids droop, and I feel as if I am carrying a huge lump of lead.

I slowly enter the workshop.

And lock the door behind me.

I move my trembling body forward, one step at a time.

I open the stained-glass door to the hidden room and step inside. I am greeted by the gold of death that crossed the sea with me many decades ago. With shaky hands, I close the door. I can no longer move. My limbs are numb, my senses fading away.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

I have succeeded in sealing forever my deepest secret—the skin hidden under this mask—and the gold, in the hidden room. This secret I will take to the grave. The door cannot be opened from the inside. I will rot here.

I found it incredibly ironic.

That night in 1873, after coming to Sauville as a laborer, I was deceived and buried alive in a grave with my brethren. Then I rose from the dead. Vowing revenge, I tried to get involved in national politics and change its policies. But alas, I failed to achieve my goal.

I rose from the grave, and now I am about to enter one myself.

I hear a voice in the distance.

It is calling for me. A voice desperately crying out my name.

It is Albert. The beautiful young man is running around the clock tower like a madman, searching for me.

I hear his voice.

“Leviathan! Where are you?”

His voice betrayed grief.

“I need power. Leviathan! Power for this kingdom... no, power for Europe, to weather the global storm that is coming with the new century. Mystical power. Only you can provide it. Don't go. Please stay, Leviathan. My sorcerer!”

I smile thinly.

I sense Albert's beautiful golden hair, tied casually and hanging down his back like a horse's tail, dancing around in the clock tower. His deep green eyes. Rosy cheeks like those of a young maiden.

He was still screaming.

I can hear his voice.

Marquis Albert de Blois continues shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Homunculi! Give me artificial humans! I beg you. Produce the mightiest warriors for this kingdom, warriors that can survive through the flames of war! Leviathan!”

I chuckle.

Wordlessly, I bid farewell to Marquis Albert de Blois.

Farewell, foolish nobleman. Beautiful madman of the Ministry of the Occult, corrupted by power and ambition.

We will never see each other again.

Forever...

Man is nothing more than a spring wound by God.

Once it stops moving, only decay awaits. Storms come and go. There is nothing we can do to stop them. Yes, one cannot create something out of nothing. Alchemy is a monumental lie crafted by frauds that transcended time and space. I am simply one of those frauds, claiming to be an alchemist.

Something cannot be created from nothing.

The same is true of a homunculus.

If you want a powerful child, have a woman give birth to it.

Yes, a special woman.

I am standing in front of the bars of gold, feeling the poison coursing through every vein in my body.

I can no longer feel my limbs. Not even a twitch.

A strange feeling suddenly floods my chest. I found it surprising. I never imagined I would think such a thing.

It was a feeling akin to loneliness.

Sadness, fear, and confusion.

I am going to die here. In a few minutes I will breathe my last. For centuries none will know I am here. I will rot alone and crumble to dust.

No one will know where I came from or who I was.

What lonely and cruel punishment.

At the moment of my death, one thing came to mind. I remember the book that I left in St. Marguerite's Grand Library. A large book with a golden cover—my memoir. A challenge to someone from the future. A joke. But it was also somewhat serious.

To whom will find it one day. My kindred soul, bound to me by the dark hand of fate. O' thou of the future, foolish as I am.

Are you a man?

A woman?

An adult?

A child?

It matters not. O' you who will one day find the book. You from the future. I beg you to speak for me—the fool—and reveal my foolish secret!

Find me, I beseech you.

Save me from this golden prison.

Speak for the fool.

And save me.

Epilogue: Premonition

Dusk was settling over the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy, and the long day was finally coming to an end.

The crystal fountain sparkled in the orange glow of the setting sun. Shadows fell on the flowerbeds, blanketing the colorful flowers in darkness. The cool breeze heralded the coming of a summer night.

Police officers had built an iron fence around the clock tower, guarding it heavily. In the distance, Victorique was standing alone on the grass, watching the structure standing in the corner of the campus.

Her eyes, deep green as a bottomless lake, had an inexplicable glint in them—a mix of anger and sorrow.

Footsteps approached Victorique from behind. A slender man's long shadow swayed on the green grass. Its head was pointy as a unicorn.

"Oh, Grevil," Victorique muttered.

"Call me brother, will you?"

Victorique snorted loudly in response.

Inspector Grevil de Blois, standing next to his small and mighty sister, silently puffed on his pipe for a moment.

"I received an order from the king," he mumbled.

"...Hmm?"

"He wants to move the gold to Saubreme. I agree. We can't just leave all that gold there. It will be kept in a bank and used for the kingdom."

"I see."

"The clock tower will be demolished. It's getting old. No, I think the king wants to get rid of all the evidence. And I agree with that as well.

Victorique did not reply. She simply twirled the closed parasol in her hand.



Dusk was falling.

The wind was getting a little colder.

Inspector Blois turned to leave, but hesitated for a moment. He sighed, steeled himself, and posed a question to his sister.

“How much do you know?”

“Nothing,” Victorique said curtly.

“Nothing?”

“Yeah.”

“Father pulled some strings, so the public shouldn’t know anything. So...”

“Don’t worry, Grevil. I haven’t learned anything from anyone.”

“I see.” Inspector Blois mumbled, sounding deeply relieved. He spun on his heel and walked away.

“But keep in mind,” Victorique said, and the inspector turned slowly. “I have the Wellspring of Wisdom with me. Though I am imprisoned in this school and have nowhere to go, I have the fragments of chaos that you drop. Over the years, I have picked up the pieces and reconstructed them. I know a lot of things now. A lot.”

Inspector Blois’s eyes were searching.

“For example, I know that our father, Marquis Albert de Blois, was deeply involved with the alchemist Leviathan when he was younger. He was one of the few noblemen who foresaw the coming storm—the Great War. He also knew that the war would be a turning point for the world, regardless of which side you were on. His prediction came true. Now Europe is called the Old World, and the New World has new powers.”

“That’s right.”

“New powers created by the scientific revolution. In the next storm, even more scientific and entirely new weapons will be built and tested. Father fears the end of Europe. The end of chivalry and private wars. The next storm will be a war of machines. There will be slaughter on an unprecedented scale. The era of the New World is the era of science.”

“...”

“By looking into the past, I can guess what father was thinking. He wanted to use the old European power, the occult, as a trump card against the new power of the New World, science. Alchemists who create something out of nothing, immortal monsters, and ancient Gray Wolves

with extraordinary abilities. The Old Ones. If they were real, they would indeed be ancient powers, not found in the New World. Father was searching for a vision unique to Europe.”

“...Yes.” Inspector cast Victorique a bitter gaze. “With Leviathan’s help, Father planned to turn this academy into an artificial human factory. Produce and supply a large number of warriors. Invincible warriors pretending to be students.”

“But he failed.”

“Yes. And then he got you. A child with the blood of the Gray Wolf.”

“I know. After Father lost Leviathan, he must have scoured all sorts of records looking for clues on ancient power and found legends of the Gray Wolves. He tracked down a lone Gray Wolf that had escaped into the city. Cordelia Gallo. He used her to birth me, and then...”

Victorique took a step back. Her green eyes gazed at Inspector Blois. “I know. I know everything. Father keeps me here not only because he is afraid. This academy is Sauville’s secret armory. It always has been. My father considers me a weapon and intends to keep me here until the right time—when the second storm hits.”

Inspector Blois held Victorique’s gaze. There was fear in his eyes.

Twilight was creeping in.

“Grevil, my foolish brother. A second storm will come in the not-too-distant future. Father intends to use my power then. And there will be others who will try to stop him. Who or what they are, I do not yet know. But the storm will arrive regardless.”

There was no expression on Victorique’s face as she stared at her brother with cold green eyes. Inspector Blois staggered back a few steps, his drill-shaped hair bobbing.

“It’s true that the academy is an armory,” he said, “and what better place to lock up a weapon like you? But an incident like this might change Father’s mind.”

There was a slight change in Victorique’s expression.

“My half-sister,” Inspector Blois whispered dryly. He hobbled out onto the pathway, as if running away from something sinister. He then hurried away and disappeared.

For a while, Victorique stood still on the grass. Then she tottered away, as though fearing something herself.

The evening breeze blew her long, velvety, golden hair behind her, rustling the lush foliage of the trees.

The setting sun painted the lawn, flower beds, and white gravel paths a vivid orange.

Kazuya was walking around one corner of the campus, looking around aimlessly.

Through the windows of the dormitory, he could see students who had already started packing for summer vacation. They were loading up swimsuits, straw hats, and lovely dresses one after, singing happily.

On the benches beyond the pathway, students gathered to talk about their summer vacation plans.

An ecstatic atmosphere filled the academy. The campus, built on a slight incline, was already slipping into summer vacation mode ahead of time. The intense sun and the dry air that made it feel like the academy was not located deep in the Alps added to the festive mood.

Kazuya walked along a small path paved with pebbles.

“Victorique! Where are you?”

He looked under benches and up the trees, as though searching for a lost kitten.

“Victorique! Ow!”

As he rounded a corner, a ball of frills bumped into Kazuya. Startled, he caught the white thing in his arms.

It was Victorique.

“There you are,” Kazuya said, relieved. He sounded happy. “I was looking all over the place for you. Seems like I immediately lose sight of you down here.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve been looking for you for the umpteenth time this day.”

“You can’t find me...?”

Her husky voice trailed off. It sounded shaky.

“Victorique?”

Kazuya crouched down. The slight change in her worried him. Then, quite unusually, Victorique grabbed the sleeve of Kazuya’s uniform. Her little shoulders were quivering.

“Not really,” Kazuya said. “It takes a little bit of time, but I’ll always find you. Like I did just now.”

“...”

Kazuya peered into her face. Victorique had the same cold expression on her face that he was used to seeing.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Victorique shook her head.

She opened her small hands and, quite ruthlessly, pushed his face away.

“Ouch! What was that for? I was just looking at your face.”

“You’re too close.”

“I’m always this close. What’s wrong with that anyway? Meanie.”

Victorique snorted. “I’m fine,” she said softly. “Just had a little sibling quarrel.”

“You mean your drill-headed brother? Sounds dangerous. That thing on his head sometimes gets too close to the eyes. I’ve had a few close calls. I’d prefer it if he fixed it so it points to the back instead of the front, you know what I mean?”

“A quarrel on a global scale.”

“...Hmm?” Kazuya fell silent.

The wind blew past.

The leaves on the trees rustled.

Kazuya’s face clouded over. He remembered Brian Roscoe’s ominous words. His dark, challenging voice.

That creature is being held captive.

A monstre charmant.

Europe’s last and most powerful weapon.

A big, big storm awaits the cub.

The ominous voice, the green cat-like eyes, and the red flaming hair...

Kazuya shuddered. Victorique started walking, and he followed after her.

“Victorique...”

When he caught up with her, he tried to say something, but no words would come out. He just walked next to her for a while, thinking.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Same as always.” Victorique replied bluntly.

“Really?”

“Ahuh.”

“Are you sure?”

“...Yes.”

He studied her face. She wore the same inexplicable expression: a mixture of prolonged weariness, unbearable boredom, and something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Kazuya opened his mouth to ask a question, but after a moment's hesitation, he decided against it.

Instead, he asked a different one. “Where are you going?”

Victorique stopped. She gazed into Kazuya's face. “The library, where else?”

Kazuya was taken aback. “You're going back to the library?”

“Of course. I won. That's all. So I'm going back to my usual spot.”

Kazuya inclined his head. “I guess I won't lose sight of you that way. But won't you get bored again?”

“Indeed I will.”

“What would you do then?”

“I don't mind.”

Victorique nodded and resumed walking. Kazuya rushed after her.

“Weariness, boredom, contemplation. Those are my only friends.”

“And me.”

“...”

Victorique lifted her head a little and cast a curious glance at the face of the boy walking beside her. Her cherry lips moved a little.

It might have been a smile.

The library was getting closer. As always, the huge stone tower was devoid of people, dominated only by silence. Kazuya grabbed Victorique's hand as they climbed the slight incline.

Victorique squeezed his hand back.

A wind blew.

The branches of the trees shook. The water from the fountain spilled over the crystal with a refreshing sound. The pebbles along the path glittered under the light of the setting sun.

Two more days until summer break.

There was a sense of foreboding in the air.

They strolled toward the library, hand in hand.





Gosick - Volume 04

Author: **Sakuraba Kazuki**

Illustrator: **Takeda Hinata**

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